

Locating Politics in Ethiopia's Irreecha Ritual

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Locating Politics in Ethiopia's Irreecha Ritual

By

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Cover illustration: Women preparing to trek to the sacred lake of Arsadi for the celebration of Irreecha.
Photograph by the author.

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Acronyms

ANDM	Amhara National Democratic Movement
CUD	Coalition for Unity and Democracy
EBC	Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation
EOC	Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity/Church
MDGS	Millennium Development Goals
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
ERTA	Ethiopian Radio and Television Agency
ETV	Ethiopian Television
FDRE	Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
HIV/AIDS	Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
MTA	Mecha and Tulema Association
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OLF	Oromo Liberation Front
OMN	Oromia Media Network
ONRS	Oromia National Regional State
OPDO	Oromo People's Democratic Organisation
RSCTB	Regional State Culture and Tourism Bureau
SNNPR	Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front
UNESCO	United Nations Educational Scientific Cultural Organisation
WFA	Waqqeeffana Followers Association
WHO	World Health Organisation

A Note on Transliteration

The local terms used in this book are written either in Oromiffa or Amharic/Geez. I used the Qubee to spell Oromiffa words. I adopted Bryan J. Yates's 'Guide to Transliteration' to transliterate Amharic/Geez words to their anglicised form (2009: p. 272). For proper nouns and place names, I relied on conventional anglicised spelling for the sake of readability and consistency. Where I needed plural forms of local words, I added 's' as in Oromo/Oromos. Reference to (both in the text and bibliography) Oromo and non-Oromo Ethiopian names is based on the Ethiopian standard which is given name followed by family name (e.g., Serawit B. Debele, not Debele, Serawit B.). When using references written in Amharic, I relied on the Ethiopian Calendar and indicated that by putting EC to stand for Ethiopian Calendar.

Introduction

October 5, 2014: Bishoftu, a city in the Oromia regional state of Ethiopia, located forty-five kilometres east of Addis Ababa, hosted yet another colourful celebration of Irreecha, a thanksgiving ritual largely practiced by the Oromo people. As always, the ritual performance started early in the morning, around 6:00 AM, with the trek to the sacred lake of Arsadi. On arrival, a set of rituals were performed, followed by speeches made by organisers and political dignitaries. Right after the prayer sessions, the then-mayor of Bishoftu City Kefyalew Ayana opened the ceremony with a welcome. He made a speech that was aligned with the upcoming election, subtly calling on the participants who were present and those watching the live transmission to vote for the ruling party. He praised the party's achievements to date, briefed the participants on the party's forthcoming plans, its visions and the bright future ahead, implying that the society had to cooperate so that the vision would come to fruition. He then stressed that casting a vote for the Oromo Peoples' Democratic Organisation (henceforth OPDO), a satellite constituent of the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (henceforth EPRDF), is for the benefit of Oromia and the Federal State of Ethiopia. He continued:

What makes this year's celebration unique is that it is happening at a time when the first phase of the five-year Growth and Transformation Plan¹ is over and preparation for the next one is under way. And that it is celebrated just a few months before our people elect their leaders and guarantee the continuation of the peace, democracy and development witnessed in the past years. And that it is happening at a time when we pledge to repeat the success that has changed the history of our country in the world, one that has made our country join those registering rapid economic transformation ... It is a time when our people are preparing to repeat all of these impressive changes. It is a time when all Oromo reject those who come in the way of sustaining these achievements and a time when the Oromo march all at once towards seeing a developed Oromia.

1 The first five-year Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP) was a grand plan engineered by the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and introduced to the general public in 2010. It lasted until 2015. The major goal was bringing about economic growth through mega-projects that were intended to boost the country's GDP.

According to Kefyalew, at stake are the country's renaissance, implementation of the second round of the five-year development and transformation plan, continuation of the impressive economic growth that had been exhibited, and the party's dedication to elevating Ethiopia to middle-income country status. In short, he stated that what had been started by OPDO/EPRDF had to be completed by the party itself. Given that Irreecha 2014 was held a few months before the May 2015 national election, Kefyalew and other dignitaries made use of the ritual to campaign for election by asserting the party's continued relevance and indispensability. The speeches were received with applause by the participants. And later on, in what international observers recognised as a 'democratic election', the ruling OPDO/EPRDF won the election in a landslide, or so it claimed.² In this scenario, the ritual became a site at which, to use David Kertzer's expression, "aspiring political leaders struggle to assert their right to rule, incumbent power holders seek to bolster their authority" (1988: p. 1).

October 2, 2016: Two years later, at the same thanksgiving ritual, something that obscured, and perhaps in an unprecedented manner, exposed the contradictions underlying political processes and developments in post-1991 Ethiopia occurred. As usual, participants trekked to the sacred lake, the guests arrived at the stage and took their seats. Owing to the absence of Aba Gada Bayyana Sanbato of the Tulema Gada Council (some argue his absence was not accidental), the organisers chose his predecessor, retiree Nagasa Nagawo, to officiate the ceremony. This meant that the role of the legitimate Aba Gada was taken over by a retired man. This rendered the ceremony unacceptable to the participants on the spot. Responding to Nagasa's presence in that role, the participants shouted in opposition to the man they regarded as illegitimate to open the prayer session.³ This escalated into a full-blown protest when the celebrants continued to make a loud noise with their arms crossed, a symbolic gesture known to signify opposition. Nagasa started to plead with the youth,

² It is common knowledge that the party claims to have earned 99.9 percent of the total vote cast in the election. However, the claim to such a landslide victory is highly contested by most in the opposition due to the fact that the campaign did not offer enough room for contestation by other political parties. So it was almost a given that the party that basically ran alone on the field would win as there were no contenders that contested EPRDF.

³ According to the 'gada' institution of administration, there is an election of Aba Gadas (male holders of the office) every eight years. This procedure is strictly followed and the election of Bayyana followed the same routine when he took office to preside over the Tulema Gada Council. Bayyana took over from Nagasa and there were no legitimate grounds for Nagasa to play that role after retirement. That was one reason that he was shouted at. But, as I discuss in Serawit (2017b), Nagasa is considered to be an OPDO supporter, which made his presence even more problematic for the participants who were already protesting the party.

asking them to stop shouting. He said, “We have heard you; please keep silent and let us continue; please for the sake of Waaqa [sky God/the creator]”. Meanwhile, one of the protesters ran to the stage and held the microphone. He repeatedly chanted “Down, down, Wāyané; down, down, TPLF” and thereby demanded the removal of the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (henceforth TPLF), another satellite component of the EPRDF. The protesting crowd responded unanimously, echoing the slogan. That was the point at which things got out of hand. Tear gas and live bullets were fired to disperse the crowd of participants. As they tried to escape, many got injured and many others got killed in the stampede.

Irreecha at this time had a much different colour as it was celebrated in the context of an ongoing #OromoProtest against the Addis Ababa Master Plan publicised in 2014.⁴ As witnessed in the event at Irreecha, disenfranchised Oromo youth confronted the state. At this point, Irreecha became a site of political protest, a place where the participants aired their defiance collectively, an act characteristic of politicised rituals serving as sites where, again to quote David Kertzer, “the powerless switch places with the powerful on the designated day” (1988: p. 131).

The ritual participants encountered the state through its representatives, who were doing things on the spot. In the first case the state was experienced via a disembodied political rhetoric through which the speaker mobilised macro political categories like development, and in so doing invoked distant (both in time and space) aspirations such as the country’s place in the world. In the second instance, protest initiated by the participants provoked a state response in the form of violence that was deployed to quell the protesters, which in turn became the means through which the state manifested itself. These are just two examples to show how much the state becomes an integral part of the everyday reality and experience of societies, but enough to provoke certain questions that serve as the bedrock of the arguments made in the book. What do these events tell us about political processes and practices in Ethiopia after the 1991 change of regime and the place of rituals in mediating these processes and practices? Why and how has Irreecha become a stage for such an extraordinary political practice, orchestrated by the state and the youth as well as the elderly, who arguably represent grassroots politics? What does the

4 As will be discussed in detail in the fifth chapter, the Addis Ababa Master Plan was a project that proposed to expand the capital city at the cost of expropriating land from the surrounding Oromo farmers and this was met with strong resistance. The government responded to the protest heavy-handedly, resulting in the mass arrest and killing of unarmed citizens throughout the year. Over the years, what started off as opposition to the Master Plan incorporated more questions and had larger consequences beyond a simple scrapping of the plan.

ritual's incorporation into the political equation tell us about sites and forms of political practice and expression in contemporary Ethiopia? What does the transformation of Irreecha, a ritual that has now become a ubiquitous part of Ethiopian politics, tell us about the forms of interaction of the state with its subjects? What is intriguing in studying Irreecha as an alternative and yet contested spiritual and political site?

In 1991, the EPRDF ethnic coalition ousted the military regime that had ruled the country from 1974 on. This brought new developments in the political history of the country. The new regime emerged as a critic of the previous political arrangement, one in which the society had to adhere to homogeneous national values expressed mainly through a uniform religion, language and cultural expression. Drawing on political questions of the 1960s and 70s Ethiopia, EPRDF's new project of state-building was predicated on the ideology of ethnic federalism. The underlying justification for foregrounding ethnic federalism was that the country had been a prison house for diverse ethnic as well as religious groups that needed 'emancipation' through a new political arrangement. In this way, the ethnic coalition led Ethiopia's transition to a new state-building venture, which cherished ethnic diversity. Heralding the establishment of a new political order, the post-1991 Ethiopian state is commended for providing wider possibilities and platforms for the revival and exercise of ethno-religious and cultural rights. This was clearly spelled out in the Transitional Charter of 1991, which was later endorsed in the constitution of 1995. Ethiopia provided a legal and constitutional framework that opened and democratised the space for the exercise of religious freedom and rights. This political decision created the possibility for religious revival.

What is a striking characteristic of this era is that, in addition to the increasing political relevance of Islam and different factions of Christianity, Ethiopia witnessed the reinvigoration of previously marginalised indigenous⁵ religions that are mainly associated with certain ethnic groups. For instance, the quasi-religious performances like Ashānda and Fitchē Chāmbālala of northern and

5 I am using indigenous to refer to religions other than Islam and Christianity. I do not, however, subscribe to the notion of indigenous religions as locally bound and tied to a particular ethnic group. My research among the Oromo, for example, shows that such practices are universalisable as they accommodate adherents from other ethnic and locational backgrounds. There is an ongoing debate generally as to whether it is useful to classify religions as universal and indigenous. While scholars like Jim Cox (2007; 2013) advocate that we still need to somehow classify, others like Ulrich Berner (2013) tend to reject the classification and suggest a shift in our focus. Others like Timothy Fitzgerald (2000) and Talal Asad (1993; 2003) challenge the category of religion, and its analytical use altogether, as Eurocentric and also a manifestation of the workings of power.

southern Ethiopia, respectively, became increasingly popular, and more so in connection with celebrating identities. Rituals like the Oromos' Irreecha witnessed a revival and became much more visible and relevant sites of political mobilisation. This resurgence of religions and their purchase in the highly politicised and contested field of identity formation has become an object of scrutiny by scholars of religion, history and anthropology (cf. Afework 2009; Abbink 2011; Dereje 2011; Hussien 2006; Haustein and Østebø 2011). And yet, scholarship on religion and politics in Ethiopia has privileged Islam and Christianity. As such, the literature has been dominated by an institutionalist approach to religion, the state and politics, stressing mainly the interaction of the Ethiopian State with Islam and Christianity, with apparent loyalty to a view that confines politics to the narrow limits of these institutions.⁶ It seems that studies conducted on indigenous religions offer little more than ethnographic descriptions that depict them as exotic and timeless cultural elements that need preservation. There is not much work that regards indigenous religions as worthy of academic attention as subjects that shape, as they are shaped by, the political developments in contemporary Ethiopia. Looking at the study of rituals specifically, there is less attention paid to exploring their role in politics, and it is the objective of this book to mobilise rituals to interrogate politics in post-1991 Ethiopia.

Political thoughts and practices as articulated by actors other than the state and the two religious institutions are the centre of this study. The work sets out to explore rituals and their potential as alternative political sites within the context of centuries-old national historical and socio-political transformations. The inspirations for my thoughts partly emanate from my reading of David Kertzer (1974; 1988). My assumption draws on his proposition about the interweaving of ritual and politics. I follow his assertion that "ritual forms will not be simply viewed as side-products of political processes, but rather will be seen as integral parts of those processes. Thus, changes in the community ritual are not merely portrayed as reflections of political changes, but rather as part of the political struggle itself, having potentially important effects on the

6 My thinking about politics as thought and practice draws on Michael Neocosmos (2016: p. 15), who locates politics not only in the 'conventional' rationalised, disenchanted and bureaucratised realm as organised by elites but also in other sites and actors, like religious spaces and religiously embodied political subjects. In this sense, politics is not an exclusive domain of a political party or a civil society and the fight over power associated with either, but also as thought and practice by ordinary citizens without necessarily attaching their politics to power claims. Taking politics out of such confines enables people's agency and formations of political subjectivities that determine the outcome of political processes. Thus, politics is seen here also as a domain that is navigated by societies as it affects their everyday lives.

political processes" (1974: p. 374). While being careful not to reduce rituals to their functions, I explore Irreecha from the dimension of experience by various participants whose production of meaning and articulations are informed by their dispositions. As such, I delve into how narratives are produced and contested by various actors with different degrees and forms of power register, and I link this with the politics of inventing traditions, discourses of cultural heritage, national culture and identity. The book also takes up the debates on the role and place of women in Irreecha and more generally in relation to Oromo nationalist discourses, which is manifest in the gendered power dynamics and the debates on mediumship, where they stand vis-à-vis multiple meanings, as well as significances attached to Irreecha.

Why focus on Irreecha? Irreecha is one ~~such~~ ritual that has not received sufficient scholarly attention. There is meagre work on Irreecha and its increasing socio-political and cultural relevance, with its earliest mentions by Eric Knutson (1967) and Tsegaye Gebremedihn (1982, 1984). Assessing the way in which the academic literature has dealt with the ritual so far, one could argue that Irreecha is lost in description and repetition. In terms of the themes raised in many works, there is an overwhelming emphasis on the identitarian whim and how ethnic federalism brought it to the fore (cf. Hailu 2009). Also, some works celebrate its increasing popularity as a source of pride for the Oromo nation in an essentialised description of its nature. Relatedly, others focus on the ritual in relation to its symbolic purchase in the construction of a homogenous Oromo national identity. Some researchers appoint themselves as 'guardians' who have to 'protect' Irreecha from 'government intervention' and 'pollution' coming from certain undesirable non-Oromo sources (cf. Tita 2006; Bayisa 2011). Still others look at it as a religious practice that is, if anything, exposed to the ongoing 'invasion' from certain groups of people like evangelicals, who do not take Irreecha's spirituality seriously (cf. Meskerem 2000, 2001).⁷

7 Most works on Irreecha are BA and MA theses produced in the department of Anthropology and Sociology at Addis Ababa University. A few of the pioneering works devoted to the ritual are conducted by Meskerem Assegued (1998; 2001; 2002; 2004). She describes the celebration of Irreecha, the why, the how and who participates in the ritual. Furthermore, she attempts to show the role of oral traditions in reconstructing the mythological foundations and history of the ritual. In her description, she shows the centrality of spirit mediums as an essential part of the ritual. According to her, adherents follow the mediums that help them address the economic, social and psychological challenges they are facing in their everyday lives. Although Meskerem's works are important inputs in understanding the mythological foundations of the ritual, she frames Irreecha as a timeless ritual that does not respond to internal and external dynamics. Moreover, she fails to situate the ritual in its socio-political context. Hailu Ejersa (2009) assesses the celebration of Irreecha among the Oromo community in the Bishoftu area. After giving a detailed description of the ritual as performed at Hora Arsadi, he

Privileging identity as central to the study of Irreecha seems to resonate with works in other contexts on the African continent, where scholarship that emphasises identity politics plays a significant role in making political claims. As pointed out by Michael Neocosmos, in post-independence Africa, there is great academic attention poured on the study of politicised religious and ethnic identities. The two categories “in particular were said to be core features of the new globalised world: [where] ‘belonging’ provided the only way of accessing increasingly scarce resources, whether material, cultural or ‘political’” (2016: p. 9). The problem is not to be located in identity as a site of mobilising but to be stuck with that as the only defining and also unchanging reality. Also, problems arise due to the focus on a given symbol as ahistorical entity that exclusively signifies, in the case of Irreecha, for example, group identity at the risk of positing the ritual as devoid of history, politics, relationality and nuance. Thus, to investigate Irreecha not as something that is evolving linearly in relation to the Oromo but rather as dynamically interwoven with national politics, inter-ethnic and religious relations and power configurations opens up perspectives to account for forms of relationalities and connectivities that are re/created and contested.

Beyond the identitarian narrative that imbues Irreecha, the ritual is arguably a site at which political subjects militate against decades of suffocating repression under authoritarian rule. It is a site that comes in handy for grassroots politics in a situation where political action or mobilisation to air demands is prevented. This in turn leads to its emergence as an alternative site of political practice following the regime’s ever dwindling political will, marked by its increasing refusal to entertain popular demands and political thoughts other than those propagated by the ruling party.⁸ Irreecha serves as an alternative

discusses the view of rulers—imperial, military and current. In his evaluation, the previous regimes have been oppressive for different ideological and religious reasons, while the current regime has created a fertile ground for the celebration and its revival. However, Hailu’s study does not account for the complex relationship between different political and religious groups during the celebration. He ~~simply~~ focuses on the commendable changes as regards the popularity of the ritual after 1991. Moreover, by describing the role of Irreecha among the Bishoftu Oromo, he overlooks the fact that the ritual has become a nation-wide celebration.

8 My reference to the regional state should not give the impression that what happens at the level of the regional state remains its own business. The federal state is a significant stakeholder and it is as much concerned with and interested in what happens at Hora Arsadi as the regional state. The ruling party, EPRDF, embodies the state as all the organs of the state are penetrated by the party, leaving little to no distinction between the party and the state. Thus, the state and the ruling party implicate each other in a web of entanglements, and this is the spirit in which I refer to the state and the ruling party, EPRDF/OPDO, interchangeably. I do not intend to give the impression that either the regional state of Oromia or the

also exposing the state's discrepancies in the way it goes about policies and their implementations. For instance, in principle there is decentralisation via ethnic federalism, which devolves power to the regional states. There is also a commitment towards the revitalisation of religious, ethnic and cultural practices like Irreecha. Despite these principles, however, if we take heed of the federal state in recent times, it has become extremely centralising—so much so that it undermines the regional state's autonomy, attempts to control religious spaces and depoliticises political subjects. Particularly after the 2005 election, the state has put certain institutions in place to censor ordinary citizens' political engagements. Against the backdrop of such tensions, a space like Irreecha emerges as just one site which people *re/create* to collectively assert their political subjectivities, in the process of which they challenge the authoritarian nature of the state. It is in such complex web of historical and political processes, changes in the characters of the state and its subjects, that the annual thanksgiving ritual becomes a compelling event that people from different walks of life: ordinary citizens, politicians, and educated elites, religious leaders, healers, take their participation as an integral part of being an active citizen. For the same reason, locating Irreecha in the wider landscape of political practices broadens the horizon of scholarship invested in understanding political processes and subjectivities as they are formed in spaces other than the 'conventional'. Such sites offer vocabularies and methods for unpacking the contestations, contradictions, tensions, ambivalences and other possibilities to engage with existing political orders in contemporary Ethiopia.⁹ Moreover, situating Irreecha in a broader historical and socio-political context presents us, as I argue, with an opportunity to understand the nature of the state more broadly, particularly under EPRDF. Studying Irreecha from this angle, as James Scott's phrase captures it, affords a point of entry "that looks well beneath the placid surface that the public accommodation to the existing distribution of power, wealth, and status often presents" (1990: p. 15). In many ways, a focus on the ritual has a great deal of potential in widening sites from which the

opposition are homogenous. For analytical ease, I use state and opposition generically, although I am aware of the internal dynamics and complexity of the matter. It is also pertinent to point out that, as I discuss in chapter 5, after the Oromo Protest of 2014, internal tension within the ethnic coalition EPRDF were becoming more obvious. This was due partly to the fact that OPDO showed resistance to the Addis Ababa Master Plan and attempted to assert itself as a party responsible for the Oromia region.

- 9 Typical examples of state repression, particularly after the 2005 election and the post-election violence, are the closing down of private media outlets like newspapers, the banning of certain civil society associations and NGOs, the introduction of the notorious Anti-Terrorism law in 2009 and the ensuing fear citizens began to live in.

change and continuity of the contested political terrain of current Ethiopia can be investigated.

1 Rituals: Sites of Conviviality, Resistance and Beyond

Leonardo A. Villalón explores Sufi rituals as sites of political rallies, indicating their centrality to understanding state-society relations in Senegal. He insists that making sense of political processes through the prism of religious ritual is a productive approach (Villalón 1994). Villalón further argues that

religious rituals are noteworthy as the meeting place where the “fit” between society and the state is displayed and political parameters are negotiated. They are the occasions when social structures are given concrete expression, and when state and society deliberately interact. An examination of these rituals thus offers an opportunity for dynamic presentation of both the articulation of social structures and their interaction with the state (1994: p. 416).

In order to establish this argument, the author analyses ~~the~~ rituals and the kind of relationship they have fostered with states since colonial times. The state has used these rituals for political gains while at the same time promoting them by, for instance, providing presidential patronage and full media coverage of the events. Politicians, diplomats, ministers and other dignitaries have been part of the procession, a symbolic act showing that the state endorses the rituals. Leaders of the rituals also command a significant degree of influence on the political elites partly due to the leverage their large following earns them. Villalón concludes, “rituals are central to the articulation of social institutions. And these institutions are in turn central in explaining why the ‘balance’ between state and society has been significantly less ‘precarious’ in Senegal than elsewhere on the continent” (1994: p. 434). He partly attributes the stability post-independence Senegal enjoys to the rituals and their capacity to influence political processes and thereby hints at convivial state-society relations.

On the other hand, Kamran Scot Aghaie (2004) takes up rituals and politics in Iran and so describes the fluctuating nature of the relations the state maintained with the Moharram rituals across time. At times, the state endorsed the rituals and appropriated them, seeking legitimacy; at others it introduced certain restrictions and eventually banned them. According to Aghaie, the rituals were used as “means of mediation between the state and society [... until] they were regarded as a threat [...] and [the state] therefore set out to eliminate

them". Again, the Iranian government that came after the 1979 revolution attempted to transform the rituals so as to promote a "single identity accompanied by a 'revolutionary' movement led by the state" (2004: p. 67). This state ambivalence went on until it withdrew its patronage and started controlling the rituals to the extent that sermons were censored to control political messages. The Moharram rituals eventually turned into political sites at which participants protested against the existing political order. At this point, the gatherings became "religious rituals and political protests" at the same time, and became effective mediums for "critiquing the regime and for expressing alternative social and political views" (Aghaie 2004: p. 87). The ritual-turned-protest became instrumental in mediating dissent and opposition, among other things, by providing the informal network through which information and knowledge spread to diverse participants (Aghaie 2004). Contrary to the case in Senegal, in Iran the rituals have undergone transformation from a state's most favoured sites of political engagement to spaces of protest and resistance waged against the state.

Both works tend to situate rituals in the 'either or' where in Senegal they seem to be sites where the state cultivated consent whereas in Iran the rituals ended up being sites of resistance. Drawing on Irreecha as a site of multiple political articulations, I expand on their inputs by arguing that it is more productive to ~~re~~/think with and beyond frameworks like resistance and conviviality to engage political processes in their complexity and rigour. This opens wider possibilities for analysing political practices, and to read rituals as among the myriad political performances that are shaped by various experiences that inform people's perspectives.¹⁰

To make my case, I use the two accounts of Irreecha celebrations with which I started the introduction as points of departure in my theoretical arguments. What happened in an interval of two years at the same spot, captures

¹⁰ There is a host of literature about rituals as political spaces in colonial and postcolonial Africa. For example, Jean Comaroff (1990) takes up the Tshidi Zionism of colonial South Africa. Comaroff's work demonstrates that the ritual was appropriated in the anti-colonial struggle and resistance. She states that it is a site where experiences of dispossession and oppression are protested in a context where explicit resistance is impeded. Religious ritual shapes processes by which subordinated groups perceive and articulate themselves in relation to their oppressors, based on which they imagine what they regard as better alternatives to their existing conditions. Writing about rituals in Egypt, Edward Reeves (1990) points to the involvement of the cult of Muslim saints in the governance of Egyptian society. He also demonstrates that rituals are used as sites of legitimization for politicians. For him, rituals are arenas of struggle in which different actors compete for legitimacy and justify the patron-client relationship that underlies the socio-political structure of Egypt.

the apparent paradoxes of political life in Ethiopia in recent decades.¹¹ In the first case (October 2014), the speech by the mayor was received with a round of applause by participants, which then appeared to be an affirmation of the request by the state official. This public reception was further ratified with the election victory that the ruling party EPRDF later claimed. This gives the impression that the state is indeed indistinguishable from the society—that it listens to their heartbeats, responds to their satisfaction, and also that the public is content with the way things are as manifested in the ovation and the election result afterwards. If we simply focus on the Irreecha celebration of 2014, there is a temptation to analyse the developments in terms of Achille Mbembe's notion of conviviality. For Mbembe, postcolonial states in Africa and elsewhere are characterised by intimacy, where the ruled and the rulers are interwoven partly because they share the same epistemic and living space (1992; 2001). The authority, which he refers to as fetish, is immersed in the everyday life of the ordinary subjects and vice versa: the grotesque and obscene which were traditionally the domain of the ruled as sites of resistance are invaded and appropriated by the authority to dramatise its magnificence and manifest its greatness. Through certain acts, be they everyday practices or major events which bring the rulers and the ruled into the same space, argues Mbembe, subjects aid the power of the authorities instead of resisting it, and if anything, through their performances they both disempower one another within the shared epistemic space. Cohabitation, interdependence and interpenetration are what he calls forms of convivial relation, which he proposes as a more productive approach to analysing political practices, processes and power relations (1992; 2001). Based on this, and as a result of the domesticity and familiarity that comes from cohabiting in the same space, what I described in the first case gives the impression that subjects are taking the authority seriously and ratifying its power.

However, looking at this incident on its own as a sign of conviviality undermines the possibility of other forms of responses by the society since in some instances, instead of complying, the society confronts the state when subjected to extreme forms of repression. The issue becomes more complex if we pay attention to the temporal and historical scopes, the material conditions, the social relations as well as the disjunctures by just focusing on Irreecha 2016

11 As will be shown in the forthcoming chapters, in fact, these ambivalences and paradoxes are revealed not only in temporal sequences. It is commonplace that every year, the celebration of Irreecha at Hora Arsadi is characterised by the fact that the youth that applaud the speech by the state politicians at the same time turn around to express resistance, grievance and frustration with the regime through folksongs.

in relation to the 2014 celebration. What happened just after two years at the same spot on the occasion of the same ritual problematises the conviviality that seemed apparent in the 2014 context. The celebration of 2016 exposed the problematics underlying complicity, giving way to full-blown disobedience expressed as 'down down Wäyané'. This baffling contrast in turn leads to yet another temptation, that of analysing the protest within the framework of resistance forged against oppression. From the second example, it is obvious that conviviality may be deceptive because it clouds the emergence of other forms of response such as explicit resistance, both as an act of defiance and hostility to regimes or opposition to authorities necessitating change that might come through social movement. Conviviality downplays the tensions and contradictions embedded in the relations states cultivate with the ruled and other forms of complex political processes and struggles.

By the same token, as stressed by Achille Mbembe himself, the analysis of postcolonial African political practices and processes in oppositional terms as mere resistance against domination is simplistic. Just like conviviality, resistance also obscures our understanding of the multiple ways and manners in which relations of power operate. Although he proposes conviviality as an approach to understand politics in Africa, Mbembe does not completely rule out resistance but rather exposes the inadequacy of the dichotomous notion of resistance against domination that sees popular culture as oppositional and as separate from state power. He is of the view that in the post-colony, subjects might resist, but for him they avoid 'direct confrontation' and instead find comfort in the shared space in which the rulers and the ruled co-constitute each other. Mbembe's qualms about, for example, James Scott's (1990) sense of resistance against domination within a context in which the subjects appear to comply and remain obedient to dominating systems presupposes that public events and displays are arenas of the re/production of conviviality and affirmation of state power. However, in his assertions Mbembe seems to reduce political subjects to passive recipients and conformists to the state's self-imposition as the righteous body that has to be taken for granted. In so doing, he tends to desubjectify subjects as if they have no active role to play in determining matters that have to do with their political life.

At this juncture, one is forced to ask whether conviviality or resistance aptly captures what subjects do and say in relation to their interactions with the state—whether coexisting in the same space is a sign of interdependence or a lack of other options, whether they are performing a sham while at the same time defying the sacredness with which the state presents itself, and what kinds of formulations exist in the repertoire of 'politics from below'. My position is that if we reduce political engagements to either forms of conviviality

or resistance, there is no room to account for ambivalences and multiplicities of political subjectivities that come out strongly, for instance as seen in the resistance the youth showed during the 2016 Irreecha celebration as much as in the standing ovation two years before. To deal with this tension, one other approach to analysing what happened in 2014 from the vantage point of events in 2016 could be in terms of what Lisa Wedeen (1999) calls the “politics of as if”, whereby citizens publicly simulate obedience and pretend that they are convinced about the way things are, that they trust the state in its ability to deliver and that they rely on its propaganda when it attempts to win their support. Through their simulative acts and practices, subjects ratify that they have a strong link with the state and that they revere it. This creates a political tradition in which citizens feign loyalty to the state even if deep inside they are not necessarily loyal. What politics of “as if” gives us is a view that building on ovations and imagining conviviality remains the perspective of the state, whereas societies are simply acting out dissimulation until they find the right time for overt resistance. Catherine Bell’s idea of complicity neatly corroborates Wedeen’s “politics of as if”. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu, Bell (1992) takes up complicity as a strategy subordinated groups use in their dealings with hegemonic structures of political power. Complicity for her is “necessary to the symbolic domination of ideology. This complicity with dominant-class values is neither passive submission on the one hand nor free adoption on the other. It is fundamentally an act of misrecognition by which the dominated class accepts the legitimacy of the values of the dominant class and applies the criteria of these values to its own practices, even when doing so is not favorable to it” (Bell 1992: p. 191). As she argues, misrecognition is a form of dissimulation, which in a way is “a strategic engagement in a struggle over symbols, a struggle in which contending factions seek to impose the definition of the social world most in conformity with their interests”. “Misrecognition is, therefore, not a matter of being duped, but a strategy for appropriating symbols, despite how structures and structuring the symbols may prove to be in practice” (Bell 1992: p. 191).

If we evaluate the 2014 celebration in relation to what happened two years later, the “politics of as if” gives us leeway to go beyond the dichotomies and carefully tease out the complexities embedded in the manner with which the participants dealt with the mayor’s demand. What comes out glaringly in the 2016 celebration is also that, as much as Irreecha is appropriated by the state to symbolically manifest and represent its power, it is also instrumentalised by the society to channel defiance, resistance and also political aspirations. Therefore, in what appears to be a sham, I argue that resistance is implicated. And even in the guise of conviviality and performance of ‘as if’ politics, there

is deconstruction of power by subjects, for instance, through ‘vulgar’ interventions such as mockery. As much as there are multivalent ways of exercising state power to effect the creation of governable and obedient subjects, there are multiple forms of responses to it. For the youth and other ordinary participants, Irreecha is a site of political struggle for meaningful change and transformation. It is an alternative venue to show resistance against their subordination and yet it is as much a site where they perform dissimulation, giving the impression that there is conviviality. Irreecha can then be articulated as a site and process of power struggle in which the society and the state co-constitute each other.

My attempt here is to show historical movements in material-social relations beyond the focus on the conviviality and/or resistance narratives. Conviviality, the ‘politics of as if’, complicity and resistance are mutually constitutive and they coexist, at times emerging concomitantly and at others manifesting in different times, perhaps depending on the contexts that call for a certain kind of response. To think along this line, I believe, opens up room to analyse the active political engagement of ordinary citizens, who use various mediums, acts and performances, exploring spaces and possibilities to engage in and deal with their political lives. In my analysis I account for the complexities, paradoxes, ambivalences and contradictions that inform political developments experienced and lived in post-1991 Ethiopia as they are played out at Irreecha celebrations. This means sticking to neither approach as an exclusive explanatory tool nor rejecting any, but using those concepts to demonstrate multiplicities and complexities. Within the overarching framework of analysing Irreecha as a contested spiritual and political site, three interrelated issues are addressed; first, the production of indigenous religious rituals as strong political forces; second, the intricate link between politics, ethnicity, gender and ritual together with its manifestations; third, politics as articulated and engaged at the grassroots level and how these political engagements from below are connected to and informed by the nature of rule.

That said, the study is situated in the Oromia National Regional State (henceforth ONRS).¹² It is one of the nine regional states whose formation was defined by ethnicity following the introduction of ethnic federalism. Bishoftu

¹² See Map of the regional state here—https://www.google.com/search?q=oromia+region+map&client=safari&channel=mac_bm&tbm=isch&source=iu&ictx=1&fir=WVhy1FtPuxPKoM%253A%252CXQOXXiHaSCWioM%252C.&usg=AI4_-kRWbkjJPsyN56dWr4dexeZhMA6ow&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwj9bGY_MLgAhUiSxUIHfZdDCcQ9QEwCnoECAQQGA#imgrc=DOfgbdZNUrgpeM.

is the city where the sacred Hora Arsadi is located and where the national annual celebration of Irreecha is held. This book is based on data gathered in the years between 2012 and 2018 using ethnographic methods and hence is qualitative in nature. I conducted extensive fieldwork and archival research in different parts of the Oromia regional state and Addis Ababa, with Bishoftu as my major research site.

My own preliminary observation and discussions with friends who have participated in Irreecha celebrations for some years almost convinced me that the state had taken over the proceedings in the celebration of one of the most popular rituals in the country. With this assumption in my head, I set out to study 'state intervention' in religious rituals and its implications for the exercise of the constitutional rights of religious freedom. Having started my first fieldwork in June 2012, I came to the realisation that studying Irreecha as something that has totally been taken over by the state is simplistic. Irreecha is a controversial spiritual and political event that hosts and exhibits a web of complex interactions between state politicians, opposition leaders, different religious institutions and ordinary participants. Thus, I quickly understood that the research demanded much more robust fieldwork and conceptual re-orientation if I were to thoroughly investigate these complexities.

Newspapers, videos, photographs, pamphlets, brochures, billboards and letters have been studied to make sense of Irreecha in relation to the country's history and current political events. I examined these materials not only to illuminate the historical trajectories of the ritual but also to access its contemporary representations. In dealing with such items as sources, Yolanda Covington-Ward cautions that we need to adopt a "strategy for engaging with archives [...] to try to read them both against and along their grain, in order to recognize patterns of misinformation, omission, and negativity that shaped the products" (2016: p. 29). I have tried to adopt this approach and refrained from taking them as unbiased and neutral productions. I read the documents against the grain. I kept reminding myself of the centrality of power that informs the production and dissemination of knowledge and information, as well as the way in which they represent the ritual both historically and at present.

I conducted 50 in-depth interviews, both structured and unstructured. My interlocutors were diverse groups of people: of different age groups, gender, educational as well as occupational statuses and political persuasions, to mention but a few. I have spoken with both male and female politicians, community and religious leaders, spirit mediums and their adherents, youth leaders, elders, university professors, students, artists, police officers and various other civil servants. I have had informal conversations with people who frequently

visit the sacred lake on ordinary days other than the day of Irreecha celebrations. The interviews and lengthy conversations, both formal and informal, gave me insights that broadened my line of inquiry, bringing answers to my questions as they also gave rise to multiple others. I also conducted five focus group discussions, some serendipitous and others organised on my request. I met people mostly through the famous 'snowball approach', where one person directed me to others. By deploying the two methods, I have benefited in gaining a great deal of diverse perspectives as aired and debated by participants. However, conducting interviews and Focus Group Discussions was not without its own challenges, as rewarding as it was, as I discuss in detail elsewhere (Serawit 2016).

I have observed what happens at Hora Arsadi on ordinary days as well as during the annual celebration of Irreecha, and I was able to trace event-specific patterns and explanations thereof (Kawulich 2005). Above all, what participant observation afforded me was the opportunity to observe the formation of political subjectivities, the spatial configuration of Hora Arsadi in relation to political and religious practices, and popular reactions to speeches and prayers, accessing folksongs sung on the event of the celebration. Such ethnographic and archival rigour and attention to detail has provided me access to the material which I analysed and interpreted to demonstrate the shifting meanings of the ritual, its political significance and implications on our understanding of state-society relations as well as the interaction of religion and politics at different levels. Despite the immense benefits of conducting participant observation, issues of positionality are central in informing access to the field.

I have been reflecting on my position as a researcher taking into account the possibility that my invigorated identities impinge on both the processes of data gathering and interpretation. In the course of conducting my fieldwork and writing this book, I have been subject to the possible bias that shapes as much as is shaped by my epistemological and ontological positions in different ways. Being a female researcher who is socialised to the Oromo culture, I have benefited a great deal from that, as much as there have also been challenges as a result of my position (Bourke 2014). Thus, writing this book also required an active process of self-reflection on possible biases that could come in the way of representing diverse voices from the field. For instance, whether the researcher likes it or not, the political ~~somehow~~ forces itself on the research process, from the data collection phase to the writing. Although I was conducting research on a popular religious ritual, the political dimension of my work was clear to me at least insofar as I was raising sensitive questions that are connected to the politicisation of Irreecha. This had consequences on the way I conducted myself in the field. More particularly my interactions with

interlocutors were carefully crafted so as not to give the impression that I was ready to promote or demote one political perspective at the expense of another. For instance, on many occasions I was asked what the contribution of my work would be in challenging what some believe is the ‘abuse of Irreecha by the government’, while others expected me to denounce the way so-called ‘enemies of democracy’ were misrepresenting the government’s effort to promote the ritual as, among other things, commodification.

Not only the political, but the questions of religious background, ethnic identity, gender, class and other dispositions were also very important in shaping access to the field. Being an Oromo female researcher based in Europe has its own advantages and disadvantages.¹³ My being an insider at times benefited me and at others became a challenge in the way I was perceived in the field. For instance, there was no time I was granted automatic acceptance into the group I was studying just because I spoke the language. Regardless of my claim to belong, at times I was forbidden access to the field due to my gender. But at other times my gender has become the condition that enabled me to integrate into the research group. As I have discussed elsewhere,¹⁴ my experience in the field has immensely challenged my misconception that one can be an insider through the mere claim of a similar ethnic identity and also enjoy the privileges attributed to the status. Rather, I have come to the conclusion that insiderness is a much more ambiguous status that is in a continuous process of formation.

Regarding my analytical underpinnings, I concur with Lisa Wedeen’s exposition that

meanings and human actions are fragile; that “culture” refers to a network of polyvalent practices, texts, and images generating meaning, rather than to a closed, contained system in which essences inhere to or are attached to a particular group; that systems of signification are subject to contestation and renegotiation by people who are both constructed by and also agents in their world; and that power is many-sided, elusive, and diffuse (1999: p. 25).

¹³ By referring to myself as an Oromo female researcher, I do not intend to attribute any essence in relation to my identity. I am rather drawing on the multiplicity of my socio-cultural formations (manifest, for example, in my knowledge of the language and other religious and cultural codes) that change across time and place.

¹⁴ To avoid unnecessary repetition and reproduction, I am not providing details of, for instance, the politics of conducting interviews and my encounters while conducting participant observation as this has been published in an article titled “Ambiguities of Insiderness”. For a detailed account see Serawit (2016).

In so doing, I refrained from being dogmatic in my interpretation of the data while opening up to multiplicities of meanings instead of accentuating a single narrative that is propagated by certain groups of people. Nonetheless, I have to state that I attempt to follow a bottom-up approach where I try to show political processes as ordinary citizens make sense of them using the ritual. My intervention thus is intended to flesh out the picture of politics of ordinary citizens by approaching the subject through religious rituals. While reflecting on positionality is one way of interrogating my own privileges, at the same time it informs my decision to focus on foregrounding, as will be clear in the chapters to follow, certain archives and points of view which hegemonic nationalist discourses subordinate or try to silence. In this way, the work critically engages how attempts made to monumentalise, for instance through discursive formations, a certain version of Irreecha downplay other religious practices, meanings, experiences and resonances.

By way of summary, the book has five chapters. Following a brief description of Irreecha, chapter 1 delineates the multiple meanings ascribed to the ritual. The chapter challenges the assumption that there is a grand narrative that Irreecha ~~represents~~. Drawing on the ethnographic materials collected over the years, the chapter shows that there are myriad meanings and significances participants attribute to Irreecha. And there are various perspectives and positions that inform such diverse articulations of the thanksgiving ritual. Towards the end of the chapter the Tulema root of the ritual performance at Hora Arsadi is laid out, based on oral and written accounts. A discussion of the trajectories that gradually led to Irreecha's emergence as a pan-Oromo icon is also included in this chapter.

Irreecha as an icon of Oromo national identity is taken up in the discussions in chapter 2. Based on the notion of national culture and its potentialities for emancipatory struggles, this chapter teases out how Irreecha is appropriated to embody the idea of a unifying national culture that is captured by the conceptualisation of Oromumma. The question of historical representation and the intellectual project of undoing misconceptions about Irreecha, and hence the Oromo spiritual life, are also engaged in this chapter. The chapter concludes by uncovering the problems underlying the articulation of Irreecha as a monolithic symbol with a solid essence and strong foundation. One of the pitfalls of the homogenising and essentialising tendencies is that it reproduces the hegemonic discourses it sets out to challenge. This becomes particularly visible in its exclusionary approach to certain ritual participants who otherwise claim to be central.

The contestation of who belongs and who gets excluded is what chapter 3 takes up. By zooming in on some practices, particularly those performed by

spirit mediums, and also delving into the gendered aspect of these practices, I introduce religious actors and discuss how they collaborate with politicians in shaping discourses around spirit mediums and women. I focus on discourses propagated by Waqqeeffana, Christianity (of various domains) and Islam to demonstrate the debates on Irreecha and its implications in sieving out what is believed to be 'undesirable and inauthentic'. The positions of the state and some functionaries are also described in this chapter, together with the ways spirit mediums forge resistance and carve out their own niche within what seems to exclude them.

Irreecha is a site and a moment entangled with politics. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on fleshing out politics as performed at Hora Arsadi. Chapter 4 looks at Irreecha as a site where state politics features. It emphasises the presence of the state, its continuities and changes and what these tell us about politics. It goes on to describe and analyse politics at Irreecha by focusing on patronage, speeches, media representation, and finally, administration of violence by the security forces. While analysing these aspects to show processes of state consolidation, I also hint at how the same set of practices expose the manner in which the state prepares the ground for its own unmaking. The state's unmaking is elaborated in detail in chapter 5, where I discuss politics of dissidence. In this chapter I demonstrate the evolution of the nature of politics from party-oriented, that is how folksongs and other mediums call for OLF to rescue the Oromo from the hands of TPLF, to a full-blown protest where popular struggle is shaped to demand change without necessarily appealing to a party to redeem the Oromo. By focusing on Irreecha celebrations in 2014 and 2016, I show that the Oromo youth have taken dissidence to a level where political subjectivities who take the risk and explicitly show the will not to be governed emerge.

In the concluding chapter, I take up the discussion of what we can learn from the forgoing chapters about practices of, where to, and what kind of politics and the subjectivities are formed in such processes. While pointing out that Irreecha cannot and should not be reduced to its instrumentality in helping us understand politics, I also establish that the ritual does not exist outside of, but is rather shaped by the socio-political processes and dynamics of power relations.

Irreecha at Hora Arsadi

In the public imaginations, Irreecha is intimately tied to narratives of Oromo national identity, as a site at which an Oromo universal is performed. Although overarching themes like thanksgiving to the deities unite most, by focusing on the experiential dimension of Irreecha from the perspective of different participants, in this chapter, I would argue that there is no canonised meaning that can be established as a rule. As David Guss (2000) and Samuli Schielke (2012) rightly emphasise, rituals are prone to multiple and contested meaning making processes which we get to understand by paying due attention to histories and experiences. Likewise, Irreecha is accorded countless meanings based on how it is experienced by various people. Thus, looking at Irreecha as a site of producing multiple meanings is an act of deconstructing dominant narratives that silence other voices. I draw on what Mikhail Bakhtin calls an “absurd supposition”, referring to his own stipulations quoted here. For Bakhtin,

the system of popular-festive images was developed and went on living over thousands of years. This long development had its own scoria, its own dead deposits in manners, beliefs, prejudices. But in its basic line this system grew and was enriched; it acquired a new meaning, absorbed the new hopes and thoughts of the people. It was transformed in the crucible of the people's new experience. The language of images developed new and more refined nuances (1984: p. 211).

The discussions here are based on my participation in the celebrations of September 2013 and October 2014. My observations are, of course, complemented by conversations with people who participated for years as well as video recordings obtained from the regional state's tourism bureau and individuals' archives. I do not claim to exhaustively describe the ritual as it happens but rather hope to show a glimpse of the general atmosphere of the celebration. Towards the end of the chapter, I explore the transformation of Irreecha at Hora Arsadi from a Tulema bound and ethnically diverse religious ritual to an Oromo national identity marker.

One of the most popular manifestations of the commitment to the deities is the strict performance of certain rituals and prayers for propitiation. Irreecha is one such major ritual of prayer and thanksgiving dedicated to Waaqa and the Ayyana (guardian spirits Waaqa created). The ritual is tied to a sacred site and

a season: which site hosts Irreecha and at which point in time are determined based on the purpose attached to the performance. In the Tulema Oromo tradition,¹ there are six major lakes and eight mountains where collective rituals and other socio-cultural ceremonies take place. The lakes—also known as ‘Waaqa’s Lakes’—are Hora Arsadi, Hora Kille, Hora Hadho, Hora Gindib, Hora Warab and Hora Yerer. The mountains—also known as ‘Waaqa’s Mountains’—are Mount Ziqala, Mount Yerer, Mount Furi, Mount Waro Dhalcha, Mount Foyata, Mount Wechecha and Mount Egdiu. They are all located in Oromia regional state in the East Shewa zone. From the list of Waaqa’s Mountains and Lakes, Zuqala and Arsadi respectively are the most revered sacred sites for the biannual ritual of Irreecha. Mount Zuqala is the sacred hill where the ritual of prayer for rain takes place while Hora Arsadi is the site of the thanksgiving ritual after the rainy season.²

To celebrate Irreecha in either of the sites is one way of acknowledging the existence of an omnipotent Waaqa. It is performed as part of the adherents’ belief in Waaqa and spirits assigned to protect humans and everything else within the universe. It is also a moment of recognising the deities as sources of all authority with the power to play the role of regulators of human existence. In performing the ritual, people recognise Waaqa’s “power, strengths, indomitability, dominance, mighty, omnipotence, and invincibility, among other meanings.”³ The ritual presupposes the propensity to prayer and gratefulness. Prayer for a good harvest, adoration and thanksgiving in response to addressed demands are at the centre of the ritual complex. Irreecha is practiced to pay tribute to Waaqa, who is the only one that is able to perfectly coordinate natural phenomena in an orderly manner, as evidenced, for instance, in the transition from one season to another. It is a ceremony of pleading with the deities for provision or giving back to them in the form of gratitude. It is a ritual performance, which, according to Eric Knutson, is meant to transcend the boundary that divides the human and superhuman “and thereby establish channels of communication through which the superhuman power flow[s] into the human world” (Knutson 1967: p. 47). In this sense, the ritual is held to commemorate the bond between Waaqa and Waaqa’s creatures, as well as the resonance of all that is in the universe. It is a day of remembrance that keeps

1 Tulema are one of the major sub-groups of the Oromo mostly settled in central Ethiopia.

2 The sanctioning of these sites as sacred follows stories told about some miraculous incidents that the community believes to have happened at each geographical feature. The miracles that are associated with the places are taken as evidence attesting to the presence of the divine and hence their designation as sacred topographies that afford humans access to the divine in the way Mircea Eliade (1957) describes.

3 Buli Edjeta Jobir. (2016) Into the heart of Irreecha. *Addis Standard*, October, p. 14.

recurring where by the experience with the past is played out in the celebration at the present.⁴ The temporal dimension of Irreecha, as intrinsically linked to the non-linear Oromo conception of time, is captured in the song women and girls sing along the way to Hora Arsadi in the morning of the Irreecha celebration. They sing 'mareeho mareeho', 'we have reached a full circle. The circle is full now, we are here again please bless us with peace. We are here again to thank you for completing the circle'. Completion of a circle is a metaphor used to describe the meeting of times. It refers to the time between last year's Irreecha and the one being celebrated.⁵ It is not leaving behind a linear sense of time progressing towards the future. Time is not measured in clock, it is continuously recurring.⁶ Since it is a ceremony tightly tied to seasons, the ritual is, in a way, also an expression of agrarian modes of life and their link to time. By performing the thanksgiving ritual, people articulate nature's significance for productivity, wealth, survival and well-being as much as they articulate the idea of authority.

Although there are designated times and sites, Irreecha can be performed anywhere at any time. And yet, since it is performed to either plead with Waaqa and the benevolent spirits, or to express gratitude, there is a link between each ritual performed in different times at different places. Therefore, it can be conceptualised as a set of sequential rituals; that contains ceremonies that are interrelated. There are at least four major Irreecha celebrations that most people I interviewed recognise. Irreecha Dire (of open field), Mana/Galma (of home/temple), Tulu (of hilltop) and Malka (of lake/riverside). Irreecha Dire is a ritual that takes place in an open field. This takes place at a time of harvest and people hold the ceremony to rejoice in unison, counting the blessings Waaqa has granted them. Irreecha Mana/Galma (of home/temple) is another version of the ritual that takes place at individual homes or at the temple of Qallu or Qalliti (male or female spirit mediums possessed by Ayyana). It is performed at childbirth, for weddings, when calves are born, before sowing seed, while harvesting, while crossing rivers or streams. It is performed to keep at bay possible afflictions and mishaps. Irreecha Tulu, a ritual that is performed on top of hills, is a communal Irreecha where people living in a given village gather on top of a sacred hill to perform prayers. This ritual takes place in the dry season, to pray for sustainable rain in the coming months. Irreecha Malka (of lakeside/water body) is the one that is performed at the edge of selected lakes or riverbanks.

4 Nagasa Nagawo. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (25 November 2012).

5 Nagasa Nagawo. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (25 November 2012).

6 Time in the context of Irreecha makes sense if connected to Walter Benjamin's (1968) idea of time as a continuously recurring in a guise of holidays and remembrance.

It is the one that is held in the premises of a Qallu/Qalliti. The crowd treks to the Malka, being led by the spirit medium and the Aba Malka as well as the group of seniors in the community.⁷ Aba Malka is the man who is responsible for reciting prayers and opening the ceremony. An English equivalent for Aba Malka is overseer of the sacred lake, pond or stream for a given district. One becomes an Aba Malka provided that he comes from the family of the senior clan recognised in the area in which the ceremony is taking place. This gives him the right to open ceremonies like Irreecha.⁸

1 Hora Arsadi: Stories Produce the Sacred

This book focuses on Irreecha Malka, and more particularly, the one held at the sacred Hora Arsadi. Hora Arsadi is located to the northeast of Bishoftu city centre in East Shewa zonal administration. The lake is named as such after a man called Arsadi who was the leader of the Liben (a sub-branch in the Tulema group) Oromo. According to the Tulema Oromo narratives of their genealogy, Tulema was a man who had three sons, namely Dachi, Bachoo and Jille. Dachi was the eldest son, and due to this his lineage is bestowed with seniority. Dachi fathered Adea and two other sons. Adea was Dachi's oldest son, and he succeeded his father as the chief of the community. Adea passed the power to his first-born, called Arsadi, when he died. One day, Arsadi fell ill and decided to leave his home and wander about. As he approached the vicinity of the lake, he rested under a tree at a spot known as Birbirsä Foqa. He then fell asleep for eight days without any food or drink. When he woke up, he had been cured. This then led to the belief that the spot where he slept is special.⁹ This in turn resulted in the nomination of the lake as the most sacred of all in the category of six. From then on, a thanksgiving ritual has been held in recognition of Waaqa's presence at the site, as well as in remembrance of the creator's kindness to human beings. It began to be revered as a site where Waaqa is close and people can visit to get in touch with the most revered. The lake was ~~thus~~ named Hora Arsadi after the person.¹⁰

7 Nagasa Nagawo. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (25 November 2012).

8 I participated in an Irreecha ritual organised by a spirit medium known as Abebech Wuletu in Selale, Debretsiege area of North Shewa zone on June 19, 2012.

9 Aba Gada Beyene Senbeto. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (27 November 2013).

10 Caalaa Sori. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (27 November 2013). Alemayehu Haile also extensively writes describing the genealogy and stories tied to the life of Arsadi (Alemayehu 2008 EC).

In another account, the story of Hora Arsadi's sacredness changes slightly. Recounting what he grew up hearing, Kebede Tikse, an elder who frequents Hora Arsadi on ordinary days as well as during the main celebration, states that Hora Arsadi was a very small pond which catered to the needs of those who lived nearby. All of those who fetched water from the pond were supposed to cover it with a lid once they filled their containers. One afternoon a woman ran to the pond to fetch water; she was distressed because she had left a crying baby at home to whom she had to return as fast as she could. She forgot to put the lid back on the pond. Left uncovered, the water overflowed the whole area. Meanwhile, a cattle herder called Arsadi was leading his cattle towards the pond. Upon arrival, he saw ~~flooding~~ the vicinity. He was helpless and could not escape the rapidly advancing water. He drowned with his cattle. This was followed by a popular belief that Arsadi had changed to a spirit that lives in the water. When the water settled, people started fetching from it again. One afternoon a young girl went to fetch water and she drowned.¹¹ Those who believed in the conversion of Arsadi to a spirit pleaded with him to release her. One day she popped out of the lake and said something that affirmed the local speculation about Arsadi's deification. She said she is possessed by a spirit known as Arsadi, and he is the one speaking, not her. The people of the village who were desperate because of her sudden disappearance rejoiced at seeing her and requested the spirit to release her. The spirit ~~promised~~ to do so on condition that they kill a sacrificial animal for him and promise to do it every year. They complied as per the spirit's request. According to Lomi, who asserts to be a descendant of the girl possessed by the Arsadi spirit, people began to gather, to beseech the spirit to return her. They prepared a coffee ceremony and killed a black bull. This finally set the girl free. However, the girl continued to host the spirit and was sanctioned as a medium. The story gradually became popular both in urban and rural areas and the number of participants in the yearly ritual increased. As this story grew popular, Lomi asserts, all the famous spirit mediums began to gather at Hora Arsadi because of the seniority and might of the spirit that spoke through the young girl. Since then, people have realised that

this lake is above all lakes because the spirits in it approach people and talk to them. That is why everybody comes here. Talking about the spirit, this lake is the first from which the benevolent spirit manifested itself.

11 Kebede Tikse. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (16 March 2013). Kebede has participated in Irreecha since childhood and he is one of those who endorse Lomi Deme's assertion to be a descendant of the spirit that is believed to come out of the sacred lake.

This resulted in the lake's capacity to heal all sorts of misfortunes and ailments that afflict adherents. The lake is chosen due to the power it is endowed with, it is not like other ordinary lakes. All people revere the spirit in the lake, some come and visit as often as possible others maintain their relationship even when they are far.¹²

Belay, one of my key interlocutors who spends every day at the lakeside, claims that the lake's surroundings have witnessed miracles of different kinds. Even if "wicked people do something that is detrimental to someone's life, the water destabilises all the bad spell and the poison".¹³ Along these lines, Lomi stresses that she has never gone to the clinic to solve any health related problems, either for herself or for her children. She communicates the health concern to Waaqa through the spirit. For those who believe in the spirits and want to appease them, Hora Arsadi is a gathering spot for communication between humans and the spirits, as well as humans with humans.¹⁴

These narratives have their roles to play in the transformation of Hora Arsadi from an ordinary lake to a point of contact between humans and the divine. Through these stories, Hora Arsadi is constructed as a door through which the spirits descend to humans and humans ascend to the divine, making it an extraordinary site of interaction.¹⁵ This resonates with Martyn Smith's (2011) proposition that humans experience the sacred through stories that are mapped onto ordinary places, leading to the elevation of their status. Depending on the kind of story attached to a certain site, the status and significance of the place changes. Thus, physical landscapes that seem inconsequential are lifted

12 Lomi Deme. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (5 October 2013).

13 Belay Shiferaw. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (23 July 2012).

14 Lomi Deme. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (5 October 2013).

15 Nevertheless, I have noted that the different narratives are not readily accepted by everyone. The first story that states the manifestation of Waaqa to heal Arsadi is accentuated by the Gada Tulema office and is endorsed by the culture and tourism bureau. It is this version of the story that is being popularised in different media and brochures distributed on the day of the celebration. Thus, it has assumed a higher status as it is taken up by institutions that have the power and the capacity to publicise it. The second narrative, which involves the girl's possession by the Arsadi spirit, is popularised by the spirit mediums, including Lomi Deme. Their version of the story has been invalidated by the Gada officials as irrelevant to the Oromo religious worldview and labelled as alien. And this dispute is directly connected to what will be discussed in the third chapter regarding the religious contestations and debates. However, the two narratives are not mutually exclusive, but intertwined. For instance, in both cases, Hora Arsadi is a fixed point or a door, to use Eliade (1957), through which the divine descends to earth and the humans ascend to the heavens to be in constant touch with each other. In their own ways, both stories have played roles in boosting the status of Hora Arsadi from a local to a national sacred space.

to sacredness based on how prominent stories are attached to them. From the narratives that connect the revelation of the divine, the stories built around Arsadi account for the lake's elevation as well as legitimacy. Hora Arsadi assumed prominence as Waaqa's chosen site and gradually began to host all six children of the Tulema Oromo to perform the thanksgiving ritual. As will be discussed in the next sections, the post-1991 socio-political developments further lifted the status of Hora Arsadi from a Tulema-limited ritual topography to a pan-Oromo rallying point where Oromo from different parts of the country get together and celebrate Irreecha as a symbol of national identity.

The Oda, which is a sycamore tree (*Ficus gnaphalocarpa*) and the Sida stone grace the vicinity of the lake, in addition to ritual objects people carry with them when they come to the lake. The Oda is a sacred tree which Irreecha goers regard with high reverence. Most believe that it hosts benevolent spirits. People's relationship to the tree is part of an extended tradition among many Oromo as other scholars have pointed out. Odd Erik's (1996) research among the Tulema Oromo who live in the Dera area of Northern Shewa confirms that certain chosen trees are believed to embody spirits for which they are regarded with adoration. Oda serves as a sacred space for prayers and rituals related to rainmaking and other collective practices, as the tree is an abode of benevolent spirits (Trimingham 1952). By the same token, the Oda at Hora Arsadi has a great spiritual value and significance. The giant Oda tree has been smeared with butter for many years, making part of it grow darker.¹⁶ Beside the tree, there is a big rock known as Sida. It is a sacred object revered by the spirit mediums and their followers. Sida is a kind of smooth basaltic stone. It symbolises the intact promise Waaqa made to the believers and that they have kept their commitment to Waaqa as stark as a stone. For some, it is equivalent to the tabot (replica of the arc of the covenant) of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The stone is preferred if it comes out of water bodies like Malka. It is not recognised as a sacred object if humans carve it out.¹⁷ On both the Sida and under the tree people give offerings and pour libations. They also smear the Sida with butter, just as they do the Oda tree.

16 There is a two-foot-high circular cement wall surrounding the Oda tree. Professor Mesfin, a devout Waqqeffata, built this ^{at} his own expense. People sit on the wall and the opening facing the lake serves as a gateway for the movement of ritual participants towards the lake and back to the tree. It serves as an entrance.

17 Belay Shiferaw. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (23 July 2012). My other key interlocutor Kuma also shares this view.



FIGURE 1.1
The Oda tree and the Sida
PHOTOGRAPH BY THE
AUTHOR

2 A Glimpse of the Celebration

I arrived in Bishoftu a day before Irreecha, on the morning of September 28, 2013. I checked into the hotel, which I had to book a week before for fear of not finding accommodations as the day approached. I then left to meet Hailu, who had been my student at Axum University but by then a friend who made time to help me with my research. Hailu and I met and walked on the main road to observe the goings-on in the city. We then settled in a small cafe, where we had a quick breakfast and coffee. Right after coffee, we rushed to the town hall where there was a panel discussion. The eve's programs began with this panel discussion, which is meant to create awareness about the 'real' meaning and significance of the ritual. It was organised by the regional state's tourism and culture office, and invited speakers shared their ideas via this platform. This was followed by different exhibitions and street shows, including trade fairs. Towards late afternoon, there were fashion shows and concerts sponsored by different institutions, including colleges, anti-HIV/AIDS advocacy groups and

NGOs. The eve is marked by heavy traffic, large numbers of pedestrians and a significant number of police officers. The main streets and squares of the city get decorated with colourful signposts, placards, slogans and billboards. Cafeterias, coffee houses, shops, hotels and restaurants are busy getting ready to welcome Irreecha guests. Loud music from every corner adds more layers to the sound of the celebratory mood. Walking on the streets of Bishoftu, one witnesses the overwhelming diversity and colourfulness of the city.¹⁸ The city centre exhibits readiness for amusement, and entertainment. While the inner city is swamped by such activities, the army and the police head to the Hora Arsadi area to cordon it off and make sure that no one approaches the lake. They clear the ground ~~and make sure~~ that it is safe for the morning session.¹⁹

Knowing that the celebration starts at dawn with people walking towards Hora Arsadi, on Sunday, September 29, 2013, I woke up early in the morning. At 6:00 AM I arrived at the compound where Irreecha-goers were preparing to leave. Elderly women ~~carry~~ who carry a ceremonial stick known as Siqqe lead, singing the famous 'mareeho' (the circle is full). The girls in their traditional attire accompany them in the singing. Men of different statuses, like the Aba Gada, Aba Malka, and other dignitaries, also follow them in the singing. On the left, right and behind the Aba Gadas and Aba Malkas come the Kusa/Fole, a group of young men. They are identified by the hats they wear. A Kusa/Fole must put a feather on top of his hat to be recognised as such. The main assignment of the Kusa/Fole is to guard or protect the Aba Gadas from people who may distract them from focusing on the singing and walking. This is usually the case because ~~excited~~ participants run to the Aba Gadas or Aba Malkas to take their pictures or take pictures with them. Making the Kusa/Fole act as the guards was a tweak introduced by people from the regional state's culture and tourism bureau to tackle the issue according to one of the experts in the

¹⁸ The organising committee is composed of representatives from the regional state's Culture and Tourism Bureau, from the Bishoftu city municipality, from the OPDO and Aba Gada council of the Tulema. A week or two before the celebration, the organising committee releases a media statement on the regional state's television and radio stations. Different websites publish the date of the celebration, inviting Oromo across the country and those outside.

¹⁹ It is believed that Irreecha must always be celebrated the Sunday after the Mäsequal celebration by Ethiopian Orthodox Christians. For instance, if Mäsequal is on a Saturday, the next day should be devoted to the ritual. However, for the last few years, the organisers have not always adhered to this norm. For instance, the 2014 celebration followed what the organisers proposed. While Irreecha should have been celebrated on September 28, the day after Mäsequal, it was postponed to the next week, October 5. This flexibility was needed because the organisers were concerned that not many people would come just a day after yet another big holiday.



FIGURE 1.2 Celebration on the morning of September 29, 2013
PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR

bureau.²⁰ In the very last row we see the men on horses. Other Irreecha-goers either walk as a group or alone at their own pace, but all eventually meet at the sacred lake. Journalists are busy trying to get everything on record; some walk on foot while others record while standing in the bed of a pick-up car driven slowly. Vehicles passing through the city are put on hold until the celebrants turn in the direction of the lake.

When they reach the lake, they are received by other participants—some who have been waiting for them to open the ceremony ~~with Irreechu~~ and the ensuing prayers; others who have been doing their own things. In this event, the Aba Malka is at the centre to open the celebration. After he does the opening, which is known as Malka saquu, the Aba Gadas and other dignitaries strike the water with the freshly cut grass and sprinkle it on themselves and others close by. They then go to the stage prepared for the ceremony and recite prayers and blessings. The Aba Malkas and the Aba Gadas recite the prayers that run along different thematic lines, depending on their concerns for the year. The following are examples of the most repeated prayers said during the

20 Alemu Serbessa. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele (22 November 2013).

celebration.²¹ Every man who is called on the stage for ebba (prayer) starts by saying,

Hayyee, Hayyee ya Waaqi	oh ... oh, behold Waaqa
Waaqa sagaltammaan garba	Waaqa of the ninety springs
Waaqa salgan Borana	Waaqa of the nine Borana families
Waaqa bokku gurrachaa	Waaqa of the black sceptre
Waaqa burqqaa walaabuu	Waaqa of the walabu spring
Waaqa burqqaa finffinee	Waaqa of finffinne's spring
Waaqa Oromoticha	Waaqa of Oromo men
Waaqa Oromttiti	Waaqa of Oromo women

After invoking Waaqa and the spirits he assigned for all the places, rivers, lakes, hilltops, as well as cattle, and Oromo men and women, he then prays and the people respond in unison:

Kan nagan nu bulchite nagan nuoolchi	bulchi Waaq!
protect us during the day as you protected us at night	protect us Waaq!
Irraa gora nuoolchi	oolchi Waaq!
Keep us away from deviants who lead us astray	keep us away!
Gadaan rooba gabbinna	gabbissi Waaq!
Gadaa is rainy and good	make it so Waaq! ²²

Even though the above examples of prayer verses are said by all the selected men, prayers are open for improvisation, granting flexibility regarding the theme one wants to pray about. Prayers also change in time in terms of their content and emphasis. But generally they reflect the socio-economic, political, cultural and spiritual life of the society and the centrality of Waaqa.²³

There is a modern music band that performs for the celebrants on the stage organised by the city administration. The band strikes up Oromo music and thousands of onlookers position themselves at ideal spots so they have a good view of the stage and can see the singers as well as the speakers. Others ignore the band, form groups and sing while running through the streets. Quite

21 However, the change registered during the celebrations of 2013 and 2014 was that Aba Gadas and Aba Malkas come to the lake after the government officials leave the area. According to some interlocutors, this is a distortion that resulted from the extreme politicisation of the ritual. Normally, everything, even receiving guests, should have happened after performing the ritual by the lakeside.

22 Field notes from the celebrations of September 2013 and October 2014.

23 For more on the analysis of prayers as political texts, see Serawit (2018).

a number of celebrants sit at the makeshift coffee shops and bars ~~that line~~ the sides of the main streets. The main roads and back streets of the city are busy with a lot of vehicles and pedestrians wandering in search of restaurants. As one gets closer to the lake area, there are small kiosks put up temporarily to sell food as well as cold and hot drinks. Bread, coffee, water, soft drinks and a locally brewed beverage known as ferso/t'äla are the major provisions on offer. There is also a supply of ritual items like freshly cut grass, candles and incense in small lumps and sticks. Besides the kiosks, there are quite a number of vendors who walk among the crowd to sell bottled water, chewing gum, tissues, biscuits, fruits and cigarettes.

One cannot afford to be oblivious of the thriving of material culture and the commerce around it. There are street traders and small stalls along the road to Hora Arsadi. Retailers spread cloths on the edge of the asphalt to sell different items such as books, traditional clothes, T-shirts, hats, walking sticks and whisks. These items are decorated with the Oromia regional state's flag or with other emblems like the sycamore tree. The incorporation of these symbols into the decorations on all sorts of items is another manifestation of material culture, an aspect of business and a newly thriving industry that allows participants to retain the spirit of Irreecha through their purchases. Thus, despite the tight security and ~~police~~ body and bag searches, people produce and enjoy the extraordinary experience of the festivity.²⁴

Spirit mediums and their followers are the most consistent and yet contested presence at Hora Arsadi. After all the people leave Hora Arsadi, in the evening of the day of the celebration, for the next four to five weeks, and on other ordinary days the one thing that continues is the performance of spirit mediums and their followers. On the day of the celebration, they arrive early and leave last. Before they were banned in September 2012 for 'security reasons' as will be discussed in chapter 3, mediums and their adherents used to gather at Hora Arsadi on the eve of Irreecha and perform colourful rituals throughout the night. Offertory, singing to invoke the spirits, possession trances, coffee ceremonies and the accompanying ch'at (*Catha edulis*) chewing: some of the major rituals witnessed under the sacred tree and by the lakeside.

24 Looking at Irreecha and even the spatial configuration of the city both on the eve and main day of the celebration, one might feel that there is a lack of 'orderliness'. However, in the seemingly chaotic appearance of the festivity, there is both spatial and temporal order, and participants seem to know what to do, where to go, when to act and how. This might be typical of many rituals and festivities as viewed by outsiders. Similar observations have been made by Samuli Schielke (2012: p. 9), where he described Mulids in Egypt as "utterly chaotic".



FIGURE 1.3 Spirit mediums and their followers at a gathering a week after the celebration
PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR

The ~~spirit mediums~~ that gather at Hora Arsadi include spiritual leaders and ordinary adherents as well as everyone in between. A few names that are commonly used to describe the spirits include: Ayyana, Weq'abi, Awäleia and Käräma, while most prominent and common names of the mediums are: Ayyantus, Qallu (male) Qalliti (female), Balä Weq'abi, Balä Käräma, Balä Awäleia and Färäs. Although people use different names to refer to the spirits and the mediums, the spirits that operate primarily at Hora Arsadi are believed to be benevolent and they are treated with great respect.²⁵ Regarding the names given to the spirits, both Harald Aspen (1994) and H.S. Lewis (1982) remind us that an attempt to classify spirits in any strict manner might not be productive since they have a protean nature and that sticking to one name is difficult since conceptually they are mostly similar ~~things~~. The same applies to spirits that commence at Hora Arsadi. Spirit mediums at Hora Arsadi gather

²⁵ Balä is an Amharic word which means owner, in this sense, it means owner of a spirit or spirits. Färäs is another Amharic word which means horse. 'Horse' is used to describe mediums by the spirit itself, and people retain the name. The spirit speaks through the mediums referring to them as Färäs, which means 'my horse'.

from different parts of the country, both Oromia regional state and others, including Addis Ababa, the federal capital. The local community and adherents from the surrounding rural and urban areas are also part of the ongoing rituals. Therefore it is difficult to draw an ethnic line to designate them as exclusively Oromo. In terms of their religious background, most of the spirit mediums and their followers identify as Orthodox Christian or Muslim. Thus, just as drawing ethnic boundaries is tricky, so is ~~it with~~ religious boundaries.

3 Of Multiple Irreechas and Multiple Spaces

The multiple meanings and significances of Irreecha force a look at the ritual “as a historical creation performed by actors who often have competing interests” (Guss 2000: p. 10), not as a spatially and temporally confined, hermetically sealed world. According to David Guss, ritual performance “remains both contentious and ambiguous, and while the basic structure of an event may be repeated, enough changes will be implemented so that its meaning is redirected. The same form, therefore, may be used to articulate a number of different ideas and over time can easily oscillate between religious devotion, ethnic solidarity, political resistance, national identity, and even commercial spectacle” (2000: p. 10). Emphasising the plural, dynamic and contentious character of rituals, Samuli Schielke also writes, “rituals do not have a hidden authentic meaning inherent in them but obscure to their believers and practitioners. On the contrary, they are given meanings by their participants. Their meanings are subject to change and are understandable only through their construction via forms of discourse and modes of action” (2012: p. 12). Thus, as he cautions, instead of trying to ‘discover’ and emphasise a grand meaning of a certain ritual, we need to focus on the experiential dimension by looking at what people do when they are participating in a ritual. Schielke further argues that rather than “reducing our analysis to comparisons, we must ask what kind of festive experience and ideologies [rituals] are embedded in and what kind of relationship the different festive practices of the [rituals] have to each other, daily life, and other festivities” (2012: p. 53). This is precisely reflected in Irreecha. The participation of divergent groups has always added more perspectives and dimensions to the meaning of Irreecha, and yet the variation in the meanings of Irreecha is informed, for some, by the belief—or not so—in other Waaqa-given benevolent spirits, like the Ayyana, and their existence at Hora Arsadi. Endorsing or not endorsing the spirits as well as performing some rituals under the tree and ~~at~~ the lakeside are central in the articulation of Irreecha. Based on these visible points of divergence and/or intersection,

I suggest three overlapping articulations of Irreecha distinguishable on the day of the celebration in Bishoftu.

The first is what I call the minimalist view of Irreecha, which represents the perspective of those whose only requirement to define Irreecha is that of thanksgiving. It emphasises less the spiritual aspect and more the festive nature of the ritual. The prayers are mainly directed to Waaqa and are conducted by actors recognised by Aba Gadas and Aba Malkas. It is easier for most participants to relate to because of the less 'religious' content and more entertaining aspects like music. It is open to interpretation by different groups in line with the religious background they come from. In terms of time of celebration, it is a one-day event although the celebratory mode of the eve is part of the celebration package. This is the officially recognised Irreecha because it is the version that is orchestrated by the Oromia Regional State Culture and Tourism Bureau (henceforth ORSCBTB).

The second is what I call a mediumistic view of Irreecha. Here, one sees that the predominant partakers are spirit mediums and their followers. They perform a lot of rituals that are addressed to the spirits they believe to reside in the lake and the sacred tree, as discussed in the previous section. The rituals are performed for weeks and also include the spirits who are invited through invocations. The singing and dancing usually lead to a trance state whereby participants are possessed by spirits. Thus, the thanksgiving ritual is stretched in time and space. It is also more ethnically accommodative.

The third and last articulation is the maximalist view of Irreecha, one which is based on a view of Irreecha as a thanksgiving devoted solely to Waaqa. No spirit invocation or trance is accommodated in this version. Members of this section demarcate a virtual boundary to make it clear to others that they are not part of 'other' activities like mediumship. They are predominantly young males and females wearing the traditional Oromo attire. Most participants in this category exhibit a lot of devotion to Waaqa but also make the ethnic tone more vivid. There is usually a big banner that group leaders carry while they walk towards the lake. In the slogan they communicate that they are followers of the Waqqeefana religion, what they believe to be the true Oromo religion. Regarding time, on the day of the celebration they spend the whole morning session at Hora Arsadi. Presenting Irreecha as a spirit-free ritual is a common denominator for the minimalist and maximalist groups although maximalist groups are clearly the most conservative of all. Each group strives to dominate the scene and provide a single legitimate definition of Irreecha from its own perspective. While suggesting these three categories, I am also aware that it is much more complex and nuanced. I do not claim to have treated all the

possibilities or sites of meaning making or exhaustively explained the ways in which the ritual is experienced, interpreted and contested by participants.

In looking at the points that unite all participants who certainly have divergent views and attach various meanings to the ritual, I found that Waaqa, thanksgiving and the joy the celebration introduces to participants' lives are the major points of intersection. On the other hand, there are a host of participants who are less interested in the spiritual aspect of the ritual and rather regard it highly for its value as a symbol of national identity, or as a site of recreation and entertainment, a tourist attraction, for fun, finding love, taking a boat trip and fishing on the lake, as well as a space for political struggle. This makes Irreecha open to all kinds of people, irrespective of and in the face of structures of power and authorities that attempt to impose singularity of meaning. Without disregarding or reducing it to the transcendental value some ritual participants attribute to Irreecha, focusing on the performative meaning-making processes, one can observe that Irreecha responds to various socio-political changes through which it takes on new meanings across time but also within the time of celebration. Just like many other ritual complexes, there is no central meaning with which all identify or to which they concede. There is also no linearity to the ordering of the ritual as there might not be any strict adherence to the myths and stories that legitimise Irreecha. Irreecha is characterised by the joy experienced by most participants, although the source of joy for each is not necessarily identical but rather varies based on what it means for each person. It is a festivity that entertains countless different celebrations, some of which overlap, while others do not necessarily meet. It is obvious that there cannot be any unity of meaning that amalgamates all participants, and this makes any attempt at standardisation futile.

The multiplicity of meanings makes the space of celebration open and accommodative, making the mono-definition of Hora Arsadi a difficult task. It rather suggests the open-endedness of the site of celebration, perhaps some kind of sharing characterises Hora Arsadi. Benjamin Z. Kedar (1996), cited by Ora Limor (2007), introduces three typologies on the basis of which sharing of sacred spaces or ceremonies by different worshippers works. In the first instance, it is only the spaces that converge. In this case, members of a certain faith assemble at a given sacred space. They share the space but not the ritual or the religious practices. The second instance is an in-egalitarian convergence; members of a given faith perform certain rituals while other onlookers watch what is going on. The third typology is an egalitarian convergence, where members of different faiths share a given ritual and the space where it is held. Hora Arsadi is a fitting example of the three formulations. Given that there

are different meanings ascribed to the ritual by different participants, Hora Arsadi accommodates all that converge at the site without necessarily sharing the ritual. As far as thanksgiving to Waaqa goes as an umbrella of Irreecha, Hora Arsadi remains at the centre of the sharing that caters to all religious and political groups. The lakeside is a point of intersection where all participants go to dip the grass in the lake to begin everything that happens afterwards. And yet, Hora Arsadi is characterised by compartmentalisation of the physical place that comes across as a shared space in which all co-exist. Furthermore, the city, the roads and pavements leading to Hora Arsadi and the lake are additional demonstrations of the open-endedness of Hora Arsadi. In this sense, they are accessible to all participants.

However, if sharing entails the recognition of the sacredness of the space by all, not all participants recognise Hora Arsadi as a place where people are able to communicate with the divine. For some it might be sacred in the Durkheimian sense that it is set apart. And while for some it is a milieu for the evil forces that operate invisibly, for others it is a fixed point which makes communication with the divine possible. Few participants are of the view that there is nothing sacred about Hora Arsadi. It is a mere coincidence that made it a site of the Irreecha celebration. Still others are impressed by its proximity to Addis Ababa and Adama, the capitals of Ethiopia and Oromia Regional State respectively. To all these, Hora Arsadi is not homogenous but, to borrow Michel Foucault's phrasing, a "heterotopia which functions differently and where society's history unfolds ... according to the synchrony of the culture in which it occurs" (1984: p. 6). It is a single real place that juxtaposes different spaces serving different objects, not necessarily reconcilable, in accordance with what participants believe it should serve. Different spaces are able to exist side by side notwithstanding the fact that their existence is made possible under different conditions. Hora Arsadi is also "where things proliferate ... very different things coexist, may touch, may fuse into one another, and the result is an insistence on simultaneity" (Philo 2000: p. 207). Its formation as such is a result of the subjective experiences of actors whose network of knowledge is applied to produce, demarcate and legitimise the respective space in which these actors operate. This in turn leads to the transformation of Hora Arsadi into an assemblage of compartmentalised spaces that are defined relationally. The definition of each is informed by the knowledge one believes to have of another group and the space the respective group occupies. Thus, relations with each other as well as with the meaning and significance each ascribes to the ritual make the foundation of the making of the spaces within Hora Arsadi, or broadly speaking Bishoftu itself, at that particular moment in time. The spaces that emerge out of the real place of Hora Arsadi are generally characterised by

layers of flows, fragile boundaries and accessibility to different individuals and groups within diverse registers of power dynamics.

Multiplicity of meaning and compartmentalisation of Hora Arsadi is not necessarily welcomed by certain powerful actors. The culture and tourism bureau of both the regional state and the Bishoftu city administration dictate one form of Irreecha, as did the Mecha and Tulema Association (henceforth MTA), a civil society organisation that was a patron of the ritual until it was banned in 2004 (see chapter 2). The Irreecha that is recognised by these bodies is the one which starts with the march from the Aba Gada's home (in this case the Tulema office). This Irreecha is akin to the minimalist version and it is the one acknowledged and practiced by the Gada council of the Tulema. It is recognised as a thanksgiving ritual. The blessings and the grass as a symbol of gratefulness to Waaqa are what constitute the official Irreecha. The rest, according to experts in the ORSCTB, are just additions and corrupted practices. The ritual is formalised in this way, and rules and regulations are set to guide the procession. Participants at the opening are expected to strictly adhere to this norm. The tourism office also makes the procedure known to the security personnel and to the Aba Gadas. Moreover, the Aba Gadas are supervised with regard to what they have to say, what they should not say, and how they must say it. Alemu was in charge of providing orientation to the elderly on how to recite prayers. He stated, for instance, that he made a lot of effort to teach the elderly to stick to mentioning only Waaqa while reciting prayers. He rejects the mediumistic articulation of the ritual, as he is of the opinion that invoking other spirits is not necessary, since the day is a Thanksgiving Day for Waaqa, and Waaqa has nothing to do with spirits.²⁶ Apparently, standards are set to make it easy to identify 'deviants' and manage them accordingly. Standardising the ritual allows state authorities and experts, to act as "arbiter of correctness", which resonates with what Susan Reed observed while studying the Kandyan ritual dance in Sri Lanka (2010: p. 135). The consequence of such standardisation, as she notes and as I have observed in Irreecha, is the relegation of variations to insignificance. Not only does it demote alternatives but also establishes a hegemonic narrative and performance that thrive on silencing and subordinating other forms, meanings, performances and actors.

In collaboration with the culture and tourism bureau of the regional state, the media also promote what is regarded as an official representation of Irreecha, accentuating the role of the Aba Gadas and the officials. Through homogenising meanings, the media also become part of the endeavour to create consent regarding the meaning of Irreecha. However, as Cattel (2006) rightly

²⁶ Alemu Serbesa. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (22 November 2013).

stated, there is no guarantee that consent and collective solidarity will emerge due to the transformative role of the media as they operate at the risk of flattening internal differences. Even though there appears to be unity of meaning around Irreecha as a thanksgiving ritual that mobilises the majority of the participants, there are still contentions regarding the way the ritual is perceived. The 'consent' the media set out to manufacture must not cover over the internal dynamics within Irreecha as non-existent. As it appears, there is no single definition of the ritual although the story as told by the powerful seems to take precedence. Assigning an essence in the interest of the hegemonic is problematic because it operates by subjugating multiplicity of meanings and accounts. Manufacturing consent through ascribing one definition to Irreecha is thus a futile undertaking, as it succeeds by downplaying the multiple experiences ~~produced within~~ the ritual.

4 Trajectories of Irreecha: Tulema-Multiethnic-Pan-Oromo

In a 2010 flyer distributed by the Oromia Culture and Tourism Bureau, we read in Oromiffa that "Hora Arsadi has for so long served as a centre where the Tulema Oromo perform Irreecha and other religious rituals. [...] In recent times, all the Oromo across the country are developing the habit of celebrating the ritual along with Tulema. It is also increasingly turning into a cultural festivity that pulls many Oromo and admirers of the Oromo cultural traditions". In this statement it is hinted that the ritual was historically confined to the Tulema, even specifically to the Adea branch, although it gradually encompassed other groups across regional, ethnic and religious boundaries. This is further established by the elderly, who locate its origins within the Tulema. Kuma Idea, one of the pioneers who began to promote Irreecha as an Oromo cultural practice in the 1970s, claims that Irreecha at Hora Arsadi was a ritual performed by the six children of Galaan. The interesting questions here, ~~then~~, are about the point at which Irreecha of Hora Arsadi became a pan-Oromo event, and what its implications are. In this section I describe the trajectories to pan-Oromo symbol, while taking up the second question in the second chapter.

The Tulema Oromo have three sub-branches (also known as Sadeen Tuullamma), namely Daacci, Bacho and Jilille. Daacci, has three sub-divisions called Jahan Galaan, Sadeen Soddoo and Torban Oboo. Irreecha was a shared annual celebration within this family, and members gathered every year at Hora Arsadi. Also, from prayers like 'Waaqa Hora Ja'anii, Tullu Saddeettanni'

(Waaqa of the six lakes and eight mountains), we see that Irreecha is a provincial practice because these are geographical demarcations indicating that Irreecha was confined to some group of the Tulema Oromo. Kuma Idea adds to this when he says that “the Tulema were the forerunners of Irreecha, and that it was not well known to others, particularly in the areas far from Shewa”. This is confirmed by what Jarso (an Oromo man from Wollega) said when asked whether he knew Irreecha as a child. He said, “Growing up in Wollega, I never heard of Irreecha”.²⁷ Indeed, we cannot take Jarso’s statement as proof on its own, because the historical processes that shaped the religious practices in different parts of the Oromia region were quite diverse. In Wollega, Protestantism was strongly rooted, unlike in Shewa, which was and still is under the influence of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity. Due to the religious dynamics, Kuma believes the Wollega might have forsaken Irreecha earlier on, while the Tulema retained and preserved it.²⁸ Diribi supports this theory when he states that the Tulema, and more specifically the Adea Oromo, deserve credit for having maintained Irreecha in the face of challenges. He says, “both religions, Islam and Christianity (whichever branch, Orthodox can be more powerful), approach it using different strategies, like using local languages to convince people to stop Irreecha. They want to destroy Irreecha and they have succeeded in some places—where I come from the Malka and Tullu Irreechas are not there anymore. Only the ones that are held at home secretly have continued until now”.²⁹

On the other hand, historically the Oromo are known for conserving certain pilgrimage sites for getting together at certain intervals, and by doing so they maintain spiritual and socio-political ties. This has been established by historians and anthropologists. Before the Oromo expansion of the 16th century, the southern Borana region, which is believed to be the homeland of the Oromo, served as a centre at which the Oromo gathered for anointment. The ritual expert who conducted the sessions of anointment was called the Aba Muda, the ritual Muda, and the pilgrimage Jila. Certain representatives (mainly males) from all Oromo including the Tulema went to Borana, which is the most senior segment of the Oromo. In this pilgrimage the Oromo maintained links to what is believed to be their roots or cradle land (de Salviac 1901; Mekuria 1996; Mohammed 1990 and Asmerom 1973). Following the Oromo expansion of the

27 Jarso Oljira. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (13 December 2017).

28 A detailed account of the Tulama origins of Irreecha can also be found in Meskerem (2000).

29 Diribi Demissie. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (20 October 2013).

16th century, this changed, and each sub-clan departed with its own respective Qallu to officiate religious ceremonies. And yet the nation kept the link with the Borana through the Jila pilgrimage that took place every eight years, when representatives from each sub-clan travelled for anointment. This continued until the 19th century, when the Oromo were incorporated into the Christian Empire under Menelik II's leadership (Mohammed 1990). After the incorporation, each group instead had its own fragmented religious centres overseen by the Qallu institution. Most groups set up religious centres in the areas where they settled and gradually abandoned the visits to the Aba Muda in Borana. Accordingly, while the Mecha established the Oda Bisil, the Tulema initiated Oda Nabee as the spiritual centre from which they orient their spiritual lives, including annual rituals like Irreecha (Alemayehu 2008 EC; Erik 1996). Thus, it appears that it is the Borana, the fathers of the Oromo, and not the Tulema of Shewa, who are historically known as hosts of pan-Oromo pilgrimages.

As opposed to being a pan-Oromo centre, Tulema is rather responsible for introducing Oromo religious rituals like Irreecha to other ethnicities beyond the Adea Oromo.³⁰ What is typical of Irreecha at Hora Arsadi is that it is a home for multi-ethnic groups, a place where the Amhara, the Oromo, the Gurage, the Wolaita and others find solace and meaning in performing the ritual at a designated time. The ritual is appealing to other ethnic groups who incorporated it into their religious and cultural practices. This could be explained by the demography of Bishoftu, which has been a multi-ethnic city since its founding in the 1930s. Moreover, the Shewa Oromo are known to have settled among the Amhara, which makes the mixture of beliefs and practices possible. Admasu (1998) goes on to credit the attraction of various ethnic groups towards Irreecha as a factor that in a way helped the ritual to survive in the face of repression by other religious institutions. According to Admasu, this inclusive trait of Irreecha emanates from the fact that many

have found some social and spiritual meaning in the yearly event of Erecha tradition. Settlers among the Oromo, Amhara and Tigrean, Christians and those of other ethnic and religious groups, have assimilated the Erecha celebration into their own cultures. As Erecha has

30 After the one at Hora Arsadi is conducted, others within the Tulema group perform the ritual in a certain order. There are sacred places in Addis Ababa and its surroundings which hosted Irreecha for many years until they were no longer viable. Irreecha in other places could not cope with the aggressive urbanisation and gentrification coupled with unsupportive, rather repressive state policies and public discourses.

transcended the ethnic boundaries, the ceremony in Debrezeit is said to attract as many non-Oromo as Oromo celebrants.³¹

Irreecha, as one of the major rituals in the country, is an all-encompassing ritual celebrated by many irrespective of religious, generational, gender and even ethnic boundaries, which has also made the ritual a melting pot attracting people across and beyond mark of differences. This was the case even more so historically. The elderly still remember that before the coming of the Därg, participants used to take part in the collective ritual and members of the same ethnic group formed small circles to sing their folksongs.³² Confirming this, in 1957 EC Ayele Kidane writes in *Addis Zāmān* newspaper that although the majority of participants at the Irreecha of Hora Arsadi were Oromo from Bishfotu and its surroundings, members of other ethnic groups were also among those who took part in the ritual celebration. He also makes it clear that the ritual pulled together people from both the urban and rural areas. He indicates that there were those who drove from Addis Ababa early in the morning, just as there were those who used public transport to ~~come~~ to Bishoftu.³³ This is stressed by Keleme Bogale, who wrote on 'Yäzaréyetu Ethiopia' in 1963 EC. Keleme's account is more elaborate in the manner it captures diversity as he shows the age, occupational and educational background, gender, ethnic and religious background of participants based on his observation of the ritual. He writes that there are various participants ranging from farmers to university graduates, men and women, old and young. He also notes that people of different ethnic backgrounds might possibly have varying interpretation of the ritual. In his statements, he situates Irreecha more in the wider context of Ethiopia, rather than confining it exclusively to the Oromo. He closes by describing the streets of the town ~~which were~~ busy with vehicles and people heading towards the lake. In addition, there were games, dances, folksongs and horse rides accompanying the ritual performance making the day at the site of Hora Arsadi colourful.³⁴

The above story from newspapers and other sources resonates with what my interlocutors told me while sharing their memories of Irreecha and reminiscing about the celebration with enthusiasm and nostalgia. For instance, Baredu

31 Admasu Shunkuri (1998) Erracha Oromo Tradition in Thanksgiving: Its Assimilation in Ethiopia. [Online] Available from: <http://www.ethiopianreview.com> [Accessed 15 January 2012].

32 Werku Deresa. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (18 June 2012).

33 Ayele Kidane. (1957 EC) Yädäberäzäitu Bäal Tākābārā. *Addis Zāmān*, 22 Mäskärām, p. 2.

34 Keleme Bogale. (1963 EC) "Recha" mendnew? *yäzaréyetu Ethiopia*, 30 Mäskärām, p. 5.

Tola recounted her childhood memory of Irreecha. Growing up in Bishoftu during the military regime, she remembers the celebration where people gave out free food for children, where they danced to Oromiffa and Amharic songs, where women prayed for one another and where young boys got to meet girls.³⁵ Habtamu Badho, who was a merchant in Bishoftu town during the military regime, also remembers Irreecha celebrations fondly. Just like Baredu, he used to think that Irreecha was something only the rural people celebrated, and it was one occasion to experience the things people from the rural area do. Rather romanticising the rural people, he regarded Irreecha as a moment to see the 'original' Oromo doing their own thing in a way he found fascinating.³⁶ Worqu Dima is another participant whose childhood memory of how colourful Irreecha had been is revealing. For him, Irreecha was a continuation of the Ethiopian Epiphany celebrated on the 19th of January every year. The songs, the clothes, the joyous atmosphere, the games and the spiritual activities like trance are things of which he has vivid memories that he narrates affectionately.³⁷ Beka has similar childhood memories of Irreecha when he used to follow his mother to Hora Arsadi and play with his age mates while also enjoying the plural manifestations of the celebration. For him, it is an interesting, and at times unsettling, contrast to compare the Irreecha of his childhood with what he observes now. Back then, it was women and different ethnic groups that dominated the scene, whereas now it has become almost exclusive to men and Oromo ethnic groups.³⁸

All of the above accounts emphasise ethnic diversity. This is further corroborated by video footages and documentaries from the 1990s. For instance, in a documentary on Irreecha in 1994, the journalist hosting the show states that participants are not exclusively Oromo. His narrative is accompanied by footage showing a group of Gurages and Amharas who make circles to sing. Possession trance after songs of invocation found its way into the documentary. One important aspect of the video of 1994, for example, was the way it captured ethnic diversity. Although it was clear that the Amhara and the Oromo were the two major ethnic groups shown in the video, the journalist mentions that there are also others. In an article titled 'yäErecha Tewufitawi Gäts'ita' in Addis Zämän of 1987 EC, the anonymous author exposes a remarkable ethnic diversity. The author describes the small groups of people singing

35 Baredu Tola. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (20 December 2015).

36 Habtamu Badho. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (18 December 2015).

37 Worqu Dima. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (18 June 2012).

38 Beka Nemera. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (18 March 2018).

and ululating and points out that there were people of different backgrounds doing different things.³⁹

In more recent times as well, Addis Nägär, a privately owned Amharic weekly newspaper, featured an article titled 'Irreecha' which gave a brief description of Irreecha from the point of view of diverse participants.

One can easily see the multi-ethnic nature of [Irreecha]. The worshippers after the ceremony seem to communicate with each other irrespective of ethnic differences. They sing, chant, and dance together in different languages and cultures. They pass their own blessings according to their own background, with the expected vigorous response "Amen!" The chants, songs, prayers and blessings are multilingual—Oromiffa, Amharic, and Arabic are interchanged as necessary.

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While religious diversity is on the rise, ethnic diversity decreased recently as some began to claim the ritual as an exclusively Oromo festivity. As it happens contemporarily, if one focuses on the official celebration, one might get the impression that Irreecha has been limited to the Oromo ethnic group. This is the case especially during the Sunday morning ceremony, which is also transmitted live on national television. Moreover, the music, the dance, slogans, banners and other artefacts in the streets and squares of Bishoftu are more reflective of ethno-nationalist sentiments. At the discursive level, many associate Irreecha ~~almost exclusively~~ with the Oromo, giving the impression that there is no room to accommodate other ethnicities. And yet, Tulema became central only recently with the increasing relevance of Irreecha to other Oromo who live in different parts of the country.

By exploring how different participants attach meaning to the ritual and the place of its performance, this chapter has demonstrated that Irreecha is a complex ritual performance that gives rise to multiple, interconnected, contradictory and contested meanings, thereby showing the power dynamics that inform the spiritio-political life and interactions of those who take part in it. It is also notable how the contestation for meanings is manifest in the way the sacred space is organised, ~~where~~ what appears to be a shared space is problematic, as the skirmishes to own meaning lead to the urge to own the space as well. I have also shown that the ritual has gone through various changes historically, a local ritual performance that gradually attracted various ethnic groups,

39 yäErecha Tewufitawi Gäts'ita. (1987 EC) *Addis Zāmān*, 16 T'e'emet, p. 10.

40 Mezgebu Hailu. (2002 EC) Irreecha. *Addis Nägär*, 30 Mäskärām, p. 2.

although the Oromo remain the largest constituents. Hora Arsadi's shift from a locally bound ritual practice place to one that is more inclusive and then gradually to a pan-Oromo site of identity celebration is also an interesting development that the last decades of ethnic federalism witnessed. The question then is this: How can we account for the diversity of practices and experiences that Irreecha embodies if we are to privilege just ~~a grand meaning and~~ a single official representation that the powerful impose as the rule? In the next chapter, I examine the discursive formations that are linked to the reconfiguration of Irreecha as a major part of a pan-Oromo identity.

Oromumma: Re/shaping Discourses

Breaking away from the deeply rooted and totalising notion of ‘Ethiopiawinet’ (Ethiopian-ness) in which all diverse groups are supposed to fit, Oromumma emerged in the field of national identity formation in the 1960s. The 1960s moment of “re-awakening of national consciousness”, according to Mekuria (1996: p. 52), was picked up in the 1990s and inspired the idea of a holistic identity that has collective expressions in symbols like Irreecha. There began to emerge more visible and considerable change following the introduction of ethnic federalism, particularly in relation to cultural and religious revival of which Irreecha is a major rubric. The ambition to construct a solid national culture motivated the attraction to anything that is perceived to have Oromo roots. In this context, Irreecha evolved as an identity marker that reflects the effort of building national culture via Oromumma. In the last two decades Irreecha’s significance to and traction with Oromo across the country has grown exponentially. It has been salvaged to make sense of the cultural life of the society, by removing what are perceived as ‘distortions’ to its authenticity. The ritual has assumed a status as a symbol of Oromo national culture, and this reigns as the dominant conception among Oromos and other Ethiopians, giving prominence to a monolithic meaning. Irreecha’s Tulema confinement and simultaneous multi-ethnic character began to fade to the background, giving way to a more Oromo-centric and unifying sentiment attached to the ritual. Intellectuals have been central to this project of ‘returning to the roots’ in the processes of forging the nationalist struggle. This chapter explores the discursive terrain of Irreecha and its consequences for the broader representation of the Oromo in the highly politicised, contested and competitive marketplace of identity formation in federal Ethiopia. It demonstrates the evolution of Irreecha as a national symbol that exhibits the notion of Oromumma. Franz Fanon’s (1967) idea of national culture in relation to unity and as an emancipatory option in the struggle for liberation informs the forthcoming discussions.

The volume titled ‘Being and Becoming Oromo: Historical and Anthropological Enquires’ and edited by P.T.W. Baxter, Jan Haltin, and Alessandro Triulzi is a collection of works which exclusively deal with the issue of Oromumma. It includes contributions by renowned Oromo intellectuals like Mohamed Hassen, Mekruia Bulcha and Gemetchu Megerssa. This volume is essential to our understanding of the debates on the evolution of Oromo national identity. This rich body of literature asserts the existence of a distinct

Oromo national identity that unites the people as one nation even in the absence of a state. This was more so before their annexation by the Christian empire, which dispossessed the Oromo of their 'natural' unity to which they are drawn, as nationalist Oromo intellectuals and Oromo-sympathising foreign researchers argue. The argument these intellectuals share is that there is a homogenous Oromo identity whose flow has been interrupted by the imposed Ethiopian national identity that undermined the notion of Oromumma. The recent burgeoning of pan-Oromo national consciousness, the editors contend, rests on the assumption that the Oromo "share similar cultures and modes of thought" which they have to hold onto as a remedy (Baxter, Haltin, and Triulzi 1996: p. 7). For instance, according to Mekuria (1996: p. 54), the Oromo were "culturally homogenous people who were well aware of their differentiation from their neighbours." They also had an "overarching Oromo identity that transcended the territorial boundaries of these polities to include them all" (Ibid.: p. 52). Given the assertion that they had a linear cultural history, as the editors point out, any "local variation in cultural practice, dialect, religion and historical experience [is seen] as perhaps interesting but essentially diversionary and even irrelevant" to the ongoing struggle (Baxter, Haltin, and Triulzi 1996: p. 9). It is clear that any difference that might exist within the Oromo is disruptive for the cause of pursuing a unifying process of collective identity formation.

The above scholarship challenges the representation of Oromo by the Christian empire as an epistemic violence committed against the Oromo to advance their exploitation by ~~intentionally~~ separating the Oromo from their religious, cultural and historical roots. This project of alienating the society from its roots, according to Debra Sanders, is waged as "part of the psychological assault of imperialism" (2002: p. 185). However, as Sanders further points out,

symbols embodied in the *Kebre Negest*, which centered on Christian mythology and right to rule, as well as the Amhara attempt to impose a national Ethiopian identity on the diverse ethnic groups, were not the only identity based frameworks (with their concomitant construction of group culture, a sense of meaning and role expectations) existing in the Ethiopian social system during the last imperial period. Clearly, along with the multiple ethnic groups contained in the Ethiopian state were multiple images and frames of reference for the various groups. However, the role of the dominant group's perception of themselves and their level of penetration into the subordinate group's construction of identity and meaning is significant in that it sets the tone of discourse (which was largely premised on alternate symbols that valued the history and

identity attributes of the subordinate groups rather than supporting the dominant discourse) (2002: p. 175).

If we go by Walter Benjamin's (1968) seminal critique of homogenous time as the site of the dominant in which only the history of the powerful is registered as the universal, the struggle for national culture by the oppressed is a moment that cracks this homogeneity open. Opening of the homogenous empty time renders the cultural and historical dominant not only obsolete but also brings out the oppressed past and histories of those relegated to anonymity. Again following Benjamin, the fight for national culture can be taken as a moment of crystallisation where the dominant leaves or is forced to share the space for multiple perspectives on what constitutes the past and its relevance to the present. Thus, as opposed to the idea of the homogenising Ethiopiawinet as the cultural universal, people had multiple sensibilities and accounts of reality based on their lived experiences. This 'counter mythology' of the subordinate groups is geared towards reclaiming their oppressed culture and highlighting it as equal to the dominant culture. In the case of the Oromo, foregrounding Oromumma as a marker of Oromo national identity is part of the project of empowering the Oromo that draws on the people's spiritual and cultural capital. It is one element of the resistance against cultural and religious domination.

According to intellectuals like Mekuria Bulcha (1996), Oromumma is an innate attribute that has solid foundations in the heart of every Oromo across space and time. For the likes of Asafa Jaleta (2015) and Gemetchu Megerssa (1996), Oromumma is an expression of Oromo peoplehood that developed from the historical, religious philosophical experiences of the Oromo, and as such it is an attribute every Oromo has or should aspire to have regardless of where she or he stands in the political struggle. It is the foundation on which the Oromo establish that they are unique in their beliefs, moral codes and values, as a result of which it is a powerful category that sets the Oromo apart as a nation. One of Oromumma's manifestations is practicing some aspects of Oromo religion, like Irreecha and Waqqeeffana (Asafa 2015). Affirming Oromumma as a category that captures Oromo national identity is thus an attempt to reunite the Oromo with their forsaken heritage, Irreecha included. Asafa Jaleta writes:

Oromumma, as a national project, mobilizes the nation to build the national culture, history, political economy, sovereignty, and ethos that are the markers and emblem of the Oromo nation. Developing this kind of project requires the knowledge of Oromo history and culture, critically and thoroughly understanding Oromo and global politics, and predicting

and assessing possible scenarios for the future of the Oromo nation. Oromumma, as the national project, empowers the Oromo people to plan the future of their society. Oromo nationalists not only need to know about the Oromo past and the current conditions, they also need to develop policies that will help them in developing Oromo national culture, ideology and action (2015: p. 22).

In order to affirm Irreecha as a major signifier of Oromo national culture and source of Oromo pride, rearticulating it by challenging its past depictions is presupposed. Contesting Irreecha's mis/representation here is a process of deconstructing what has been said and believed about Irreecha in the past and reframing a new form of presenting Irreecha in a 'positive' light which depicts the ritual as a source of pride. It is an exercise of countering previous formulations and re-fashioning Irreecha by inscribing narratives that 'upgrade' it as the collective representation of the Oromo nation. This process makes Irreecha a befitting artefact encapsulating the imagined collectivity of Oromoness across possible differences. Nationalist ideologies and discourses that intend to mobilise the Oromo nation incorporate Irreecha as part of the struggle for identity. This 'sanctifies' Irreecha and makes it resonant with all Oromo who would have rejected it if it were not for the process of redefining it in a language most understand, i.e., remaking it into a national culture. As part of problematising the mis/representations in the past, there is a move towards coating Irreecha with the colour of authenticity and timelessness. Below, I take examples of MTA's intervention as a patron, discourses propagated by Oromo journalists as well as public intellectuals/researchers, to explore these discursive formations.

1 Irreecha and the Newly Reinstated MTA

The newly reinstated Mecha and Tulema Association (henceforth MTA), which was zealous about a shared and uniting icon, took the lead in piecing traditions together and bringing them to a wider Oromo audience. The association became one of the active players promoting Irreecha by taking certain actions to uphold the ritual that its members 'discovered' in the early 1990s. Why was the new MTA committed to patronage Irreecha? Part of the answer for this question is to be found in the association's history (of its pre-1974 revolution incarnation) in relation to its role in the development of Oromo nationalism, the manner in which it connects religion and nationalist sentiments, and its devotion to the idea of the creation of a united Oromo nation.

The historic association, named after two subsets of the Oromo ethnic group (Mecha and Tulema), was established on January 24, 1963. Permission for its foundation as a self-help association was granted by Emperor Haile Selassie in accordance with the 45th article of the 1955 constitution. It was made clear in the 20th article of its statute of the association that membership was all-inclusive irrespective of religious, ethnic, gender or economic background. In the preamble of the statute, its general objective and commitment were stated. Its assignments were based on a motto that adopted the idea of loving one's brother and doing for others what one wishes done for oneself. It was declared that the association was committed to supporting renovation of old churches or building new ones in the villages that did not have churches nearby. In predominantly Muslim inhabited areas, it committed itself to building mosques for the community. This was in addition to its main assignment, which was to expand infrastructures such as schools, roads and health services.¹ According to Mohammed, despite its initial socio-economic concern as well as its inclusivity, it did not take long for the historic MTA to incorporate political agendas. It was the "unmitigated assault on Oromo cultural heritage that fired up the leaders of the Mecha-Tulema Association to be the agents of social change and the Oromo voice for exercising influence within the larger arena of Ethiopian politics" (Mohammed 1998: p. 190). The radicalisation of MTA's leadership stemmed from the failure of the ruling class to accommodate other ethnic groups, including the Oromo, unless they are adapted to Abyssinian cultural traits like language and religion. This meant that Oromo were denied entry to the state and its life as Oromo, which amounted to cultural and political denigration of the peoples. Gradually, the association began to accentuate Oromo-centric interests, promoting various commonalities such as language and religion as well as political aspirations the Oromo are perceived to share (Mohammed 1998; Olana 1993; Keller 1995). Contrary to its initial formation that acknowledged ethno-religious diversity, the association advocated for the cause of the Oromo, particularly towards the end (close to the date when it was banned in 1967). MTA was finally banned on allegations of threatening the unity of the country and conspiring to depose the emperor.² Retrospectively,

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- 1 I was allowed to copy the letter in which the emperor granted his permission and the statute from the private collection of Adamu Beyene, who was a board member of the new MTA. The above narrative is thus based on the information obtained from the two documents.
 - 2 According to Mohammed (1998: p. 187), the reason for the banning of the association was part of "preventing the development of Oromo nationalism by co-opting or liquidating Oromo leadership, by destroying the Oromo religious and cultural institutions, by dividing

scholars credit historic MTA for having “sensitised the Oromo to the importance of their own national culture” (Keller 1995: p. 628).

MTA was reinstated³ in 1994, and its service resumed after almost three decades. The forthcoming discussions about the role of MTA are in reference to the association in its post-1994 incarnation. According to Diribi Demissie, the newly restored MTA got inspirations from the historic MTA about how to approach the question of Oromo unity and its place in the political struggle. Until it was banned again in 2004, the association included members of various political and religious affiliations. For our purposes here, the story shared by Diribi regarding the effort to encourage religious homogeneity by the historic MTA is interesting. It is the story of an important message the new leaders received, which indicated that if the notion of a uniform Oromo religion was reinitiated, it would easily take root among the people and political unity could be achieved in a short time.⁴

Diribi is convinced that the historic MTA took up religion as an important symbolic capital to inspire all Oromo to envision religious unity through a return to the old traditions. For Diribi, the historic MTA leadership’s ideological and nationalist commitment to uniting the Oromo was tested in one of the association’s outreach programs in the Arsi and Bale areas of present-day Oromia Regional State. As part of its outreach project, the leadership travelled from Addis Ababa to these predominantly Muslim areas. In one of the events where they were having dinner, Christian and Muslim members were persuaded to breach their respective religious taboos. In the Ethiopian Islamic and Orthodox Christian traditions, there is a strict rule that dictates the kind of meat one has to eat. Traditionally, a Muslim is prohibited from eating meat stew prepared by Christian families and Christians are not allowed to eat meat cooked by Muslim families. The issue is not the cooking but the slaughtering of the animal for meat. If a Muslim slaughters the animal, a Christian is prohibited from eating it and vice versa. Although this was a serious breach for both

the Oromo along religious and regional lines”. During the military regime, the association was not opened as its views conflicted with the unitary state agenda.

- 3 I am using reinstated in the manner Diribi narrated it, but I do also see that to say MTA was reinstated is problematic for it assumes an uninterrupted history that is taken up and pursued by the new MTA. If anything, a thorough investigation is needed to compare and contrast the two associations beyond their names and claims. However, I also see the point in the reinstatement for a number of reasons. First, at the time it was reopened, the founding members and leaders of the old MTA like Bekele Nedhi and Colonel Alemu Qixessa were still active and influential. Second, the inspiration the old MTA left behind is one legacy that we cannot dismiss as it was a source of motivation for most of the activities MTA got involved in for the brief years it was active.

- 4 Diribi Demissie. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (20 October 2013).

religious groups, the MTA succeeded in persuading both to eat the same meat since for the Oromo it is not Allah or God that matters but Waaqa, who unifies them. Gradually, the historic MTA managed to reach the grassroots with its influence. Other religions like Islam and Christianity began to be represented as divisive tools that detached the Oromo from their profound belief in Waaqa.⁵ In this way, the old association ended up promoting an exclusively Oromo religion as a cohesive device to keep the divided Oromo united under one cultural umbrella, that would lead towards political unity.⁶ The MTA of the 1990s, which was taken over by the new generation of Oromo elite, was dedicated to strengthening the vision of a united Oromo for a common political agenda. It was also determined to use religion as a point of integration for the diverse Oromo groups and this search for common ground made leaders of MTA turn towards Waqqeeffana and Irreecha.

Everything had to start with interrogating the historical representation of the Oromo religious traditions and spirituality.⁷ Historically, discourses on Irreecha represented the ritual variously at different times. It was represented as superstitious, backward, anti-progress, irrational, evil worship during both the imperial and the military regimes. The fact that Irreecha was not banned by these regimes does not mean that it was viewed as a religious practice that was at par with other religious celebrations like Epiphany. In the imperial era, when the state and the church linked up to represent the religious identity of the country, Irreecha was depicted as a practice of heathens, as worship of evil spirits living in the waters and trees. Needless to say, the issue was also ethnicised. Given that the Oromo were the majority of those who practiced the ritual, it was also used to portray, or reaffirm existing stereotypes. This sentiment went hand in hand with the general discourse about the Oromo as being uncivilised and as people with no proper religious tradition. It continued in a similar direction during the military regime, which did not do anything to address issues to do with ethnic and religious identities. As a result, some Oromo kept a distance from the ritual because they were “ashamed of it, thinking that it is primitive and has no purpose in the modern world” (Meskerem 2001:

5 Diribi does not remember, and perhaps even those who shared the story with him, so many details as to when and where this happened, but only the gist of the event. According to Diribi, this is an inspiring story that he heard from founding members of the first MTA. What is important for Diribi is that the old MTA planted the seed for Oromo unity, which he is committed to continue, by nurturing a collective identity that is based on the ‘original’ Oromo religious values. It ~~tres~~passed across religious differences and boundaries, paving the way for future unity.

6 Alemu Serbesa. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (22 November 2013).

7 Diribi Demissie. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (20 October 2013).

p. 4). Izable Orlowska also states that due to Irreecha's association with "rites to appease spirits living in the lake [...] many educated Oromo, wanting to be seen as 'modern', until recently sought to distance themselves" (2013: p. 312). This kind of representation, which posits Irreecha as something to be ashamed of, comes from asymmetrical power relations among different ethnic and religious groups in historic Ethiopia. Part of the political question the country, and specifically the Oromo, grapple with is related to the politics of identity, recognition and representation, which played a significant role in the burgeoning of nationalist sentiments among the Oromo. Thus, historically grounded questions to do with freedom, justice, equality, political participation and the right to self-determination for the Oromo have been raised more forcefully. The struggle for national culture was and still is one of the major elements of Oromo political history and MTA was committed to such a cause in the years it was active. Speaking of Oromumma as national culture, one needs to be cautious because there is a danger of reducing everything to identity politics as is the case in most popular imaginations. Even though the struggle for identity and recognition are paramount, these struggles are closely linked to local and global historical dynamics. Identity and history are sites of mobilising for broader political, social, economic articulations and demands that are knitted with what goes on in the rest of the country and the continent at large.

Stating MTA's commitment and the action the then leadership took to organise and promote Irreecha, a board member states:

One of our fellow members brought Irreecha to our attention. We then chose it to be the main arena where we come together annually to introduce ourselves to others. Our main concentration was on expanding the Waqqeeffana religion and Irreecha as an aspect of the expression of Waqqeeffana. Our original intention was to restore all Oromo celebrations to order, leave those unnecessary additions and backward practices aside and preserve the sites. To this end, we were also involved in the work of redefining Irreecha based on what the knowledgeable people like Ayyantus, Qallus and elders told us.⁸

Feyissa's quote is striking in the way it hints that Irreecha was 'discovered' from the peripheries. A ritual that was either neglected or disregarded by most is now appropriated as a practice that can be 'polished' to boost the Oromo

⁸ Feyissa Beyene. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (22 November 2013).

sense of owning a grand culture.⁹ MTA's patronage reached its climax when the association took the initiative to organise the celebration in 1997/8. The leaders arranged vehicles for members to travel from Addis Ababa to Bishoftu for the celebration.¹⁰ At this event, high-ranking officials of the association made a vow expressing their wish; with the main one being an increase in the number of participants in the coming years. Some promised to bring money, some promised food, others clothes or drinks. For instance, Diribi Demissie, Chairperson of MTA at the time, pledged to bring all the extra money he earned by working overtime. Since he worked for Ethiopian Airlines, he got a free ticket to travel to India twice within a year, and due to this he earned five thousand Ethiopian birr as an extra payment for his trip abroad. He brought the money on the day of Irreecha as promised after he witnessed the increasing number of participants. The money was used to buy items for decorating the Hora Arsadi environs, for building a small wooden stage (which in 2002 became a concrete one) and for purchasing microphones, loud speakers and clothes for some participants, especially the youth.¹¹ MTA's commitment went further with the establishment of what is known as Koree Adda fi Seena Walda Mecca Tulamaa in 1999, a sub-committee within MTA formed to promote the history and culture of the Oromo. This group was tasked with gathering information about ~~the~~ history, culture and religion of the nation and was put in charge of organising annual rituals like Irreecha.

During these times Irreecha had already started to attract a significant number of participants from all over the country. It was no longer a religious ritual that was exclusive to those who revered it for its spiritual value. It was growing into a national holiday that brought together the Oromo from different walks of life, including those in the diaspora.¹² Diribi asserts that

9 For MTA and the elites, Irreecha is what Susan Reed (2010) calls a thing of 'discovery' rather than revival, because the latter assumes revitalising something that was dying while the 'discovery' implies that it existed but was unknown or unattractive to those who now find use in it.

10 Feyissa Beyene. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (22 November 2013).

11 Diribi Demissie. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (20 October 2013). Sisay Atomssa. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (5 September 2013). In addition to the effort to elevate Irreecha to an Oromo national holiday, as part of its commitment to restore the ~~authentic~~ Oromo religious tradition, MTA invested in restoring the person who was believed to be the genealogically sanctioned Aba Malka, Tadesse Muleta. This man was eventually shunned by the current organisers of the ritual for allegations that linked him with OLF (see also Serawit 2017).

12 The celebration was even exported to the diaspora and it began to be celebrated in many parts of the world where there is an Oromo community. Irreecha is celebrated in Germany, Canada, the Netherlands, Australia, the USA and many other countries, and this

the MTA years of organisation were the years when the Oromo religion and tradition truly revived. This revival came out of nationalism, emergence of confidence and pride in what the Oromo have. The association had a big role to play here to redeem the Oromo from self-denial, to help the Oromo see what they have in positive lens and be proud of being Oromo. Eventually, the Oromo understood they are not inferior to anyone. Questions began to be raised about the wrongly depicted identity of the Oromo as people of no religion and culture. MTA played a huge role that led to the boosting of self-confidence and pride in everything that the Oromo have. I think, most importantly, the fact that we were able to mobilise the educated elite for the celebration of Irreecha has helped the masses in publicly endorsing the ritual and being proud of it. The estimated number of participants increased over the years and in 2003 it was about one hundred fifty thousand. Participants were predominantly young people and they came from different parts of the Oromia regional state as well as Addis Ababa.¹³

Diribi's remark is indicative of the connection between the revival of Oromo nationalism, the need for a collective identity to augment and the fact that Irreecha came in handy to fulfill this. Most commend MTA's role in the development of a positive attitude towards Irreecha and its role in boosting Oromo nationalist sentiments and consciousness.¹⁴ Of course the introduction of ethnic federalism and the ensuing provision that granted rights to collective celebration of identities is another major input in the revival of Irreecha, as will be discussed in the fourth chapter.

MTA's interest in Irreecha has practical relevance in addressing one of its major objectives, which required public gatherings like the ones at Hora Arsadi. The association was key in pushing the Oromo to reclaim their history, religion and other values 'lost' during the imperial invasions and

is the result of its popularity in Ethiopia mainly as a symbol of Oromo unity and identity (Asebe and Meron 2014). For instance, the Irreecha celebration in Dusseldorf, Germany, is a good example of the usage of the religious ritual for political resistance, where elders openly recite prayers requesting Waaqa to take them to their once-free Oromia, to topple the current 'Wäyané' government, to give them the right to self-determination, to enable their children to follow the culture and tradition of their ancestors (field notes from the celebration in Dusseldorf, September 29, 2012).

13 Diribi Demissie. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (20 October 2013). This is also according to Diribi's statement in the interview he gave to a journalist who was reporting the event. The MTA-sponsored journalist was in charge of the interview. I obtained this video from the personal archives of Diribi Demissie.

14 Mesfin Abebe. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (23 March 2013).

incorporations.¹⁵ Tied to this, in the opening speech Dirbi Demissie made at the 2003 celebration, he began by condemning Orthodox Christianity and Islam because they criticise the Oromo for worshipping wood and water. He then said that Waqqeeffana centres on the belief in one Waaqa, not in wood or water or any other spirit. He added that it is the most ancient of all religions and that it has its roots in ancient Egypt. And even the two religions that are discourteous towards the Oromo today have borrowed from this religion that has its foundations in an African civilisation. In saying all of this, Dirbi sensitised the public about their culture, their religion and their language. He warned that if the Oromo do not stick to their religion, they are like a deformed cow whose milk no one wants to drink. He argued that it also means that something is missing, because of which the nation is incomplete. He stated that the time of respecting the religion of others is over and it is time to look inwards and promote what the Oromo have. After Dirbi, another man made a speech in which he asked celebrants to be proud of their culture. He insisted that all should give their children Oromo names. He also said that instead of worshipping God or Allah who are far away from the Oromo, it is better to return to Waaqa, who is more intimate to the Oromo. Another speaker recounted the past and said that the Oromo have been insulted, treated like fools, that they have become servants of those who oppressed them. All this happened because the Oromo refused to learn about themselves, he said, and insisted that it is time to wake up. According to this speaker, that time of being messed with has gone now, and the Oromo have to stand up and assert themselves. This was followed by a short poetry session where different participants came to the stage and read poems that revolved around the revitalisation of Oromo culture and religion. Promotion of Waqqeeffana was at the centre of those poems.¹⁶ In addition, the MTA published an annual magazine titled 'Waqqeeffana' that served as the manifesto of the Waqqeeffana Followers Association (henceforth WFA). It was devoted to spreading knowledge about Waaqa and Irreecha.¹⁷ The common thread that ran through all the Waqqeeffana magazines I saw was

15 This message is passed on to the participants via a magazine that was distributed at Hora Arsadi in the 2003 celebration. So the print-media was also decisive in reaching out to the Oromo, apart from speeches and other forms of interaction. See Waaqeffanna. (2003) Ayyaana Irreecha Bara 2003 irrati Hundeeffamuu dhaan kan maxxanfame, Onkol 05.

16 This part of the description of the celebration is based on the video recorded in 2003. It was accessed from the private collections of Diribi Demissie.

17 Waaqeffanna. (2002) Ayyaana Irreecha Bara 2003 irrati Hundeeffamuu dhaan kan maxxanfame, Fulbaana, 29. In MTA's mission statement, it is spelled out that the objective of the association is to enable the Oromo to know one another, be kind to one another and support one another.

the renaissance of the language, culture, history and religion of the Oromo, which implies that the time for reclaiming Oromumma has come.¹⁸

MTA's preoccupation was empowering the Oromo by stimulating belief and pride in what the Oromo have. The association preached a 'return to the root' as a transformative remedy to settle the political predicament. MTA appropriated Irreecha as a site of developing an Oromo collective symbol with which all can identify and that can cement the people together to stand in unison. Historical injustice of which the Oromo were victims was talked about openly and a solution to address it was deliberated on through the speeches, poems and songs. Managing Irreecha as a medium, the MTA became closer to the public and began to mobilise some sections of the population towards endorsing their religion and being proud of identifying as followers of Waqqeeffana.¹⁹ MTA capitalised on Irreecha as a site of cultural promotion and political awakening, which entailed revising the preconceptions about Irreecha and the Oromo religion in general. With MTA's active involvement, which was later taken over by the tourism bureau of the regional state, Irreecha's transformation into a national icon progressed quickly, commanding considerable attention from all sections of the Oromo society. Not only was Irreecha co-opted for cultural promotion, there is appropriation as a site of political engagement too, for the communication of political messages. For instance, due to the historical ties and indeed perhaps because previous members of OLF still belonged to MTA, the association started facilitating, as I argue in detail in the fifth chapter, alternative platforms for OLF to get in touch with its support base.

2 Discourses Mobilised by Intellectuals

Here I discuss how much work is put into challenging 'misconceptions' and reclaiming the ritual as the epitome of Oromumma. Whether or not he intended them to be used that way, Tsegaye Gebremedihn's two pieces on the ritual have inspired a lot of the work done on Irreecha in relation to Oromo identity. In two of his writings, Tsegaye (1982, 1984) connects the ritual with those held in ancient Egypt to revere Osiris and Isis. He states that this ancient Egyptian "practice is much like Erecha of the Ethiopian Oromo where the priest himself is first washed, cleansed and hallowed by the holy river before he occupies the sacred stool just as in ancient Egypt" (Tsegaye 1984: p. 24). Based on his

18 Waaqeffanna. (2003) Ayyaana Irreecha Bara 2003 irrati Hundeeffamuu dhaan kan maxx-anfame, Onkol 05.

19 2003 celebration of Irreecha. Video accessed from private collections of Diribi Demissie.

account, Irreecha is founded upon the mythologies of ancient Egyptian rituals, which the Kushitic people celebrated along the bank of the River Nile. Tsegaye's writings played significant roles in the later re/conceptualisation of Oromo religious practices as having their foundation in ancient Egyptian mythologies. The representation of the ritual as an annual thanksgiving ritual that goes well beyond the Tulema partly drew on Tsegaye's (1982; 1984) connection of Irreecha with the ancient religious practices of the Nile Valley. A few Oromo writers and activists, such as Diribi (2011), used his input to claim a connection to Egypt while at the same time delinking the Oromo from Abyssinia, which is mainly constituted by the Tigray and Amhara ethnic groups of present-day northern Ethiopia. Tsegaye's connection of Irreecha with an ancient civilisation served a few interrelated purposes for the contemporary Oromo nationalist discourses. Associating the ritual with an ancient African civilisation is part of the historical repertoire from which the Oromo draw justifications for establishing that the Oromo are part of an indigenous African civilisation. Consequently, it is deployed to make a point of Oromos' uniqueness and at the same time to situate the Oromo within the rest of black Africa. Asserting such a connection with black Africa also serves the anti-colonial struggle that some Oromo intellectuals and politicians foster, drawing on the historical struggle Africans waged against colonialism. This connection of Oromo religion to an ancient civilisation is mobilised to back the claim that the Oromo are actually among the first followers of a monotheistic religion and that it is one of their contributions to human civilisation (Diribi 2011). This discourse is used to challenge to the historical representations of the society as a group that had little to contribute.

In addition to drawing on Tsegaye's association of Irreecha with the early Egyptian religious traditions, others connect Irreecha with the bible and popularise it as a continuation of Jewish religious practices. Popular journalists like Kuma Ide'a are prominent in promoting this version using a newspaper called *Eresa* that he started in the 1990s. For Kuma, Irreecha is equivalent to the 'festival of shelters'. According to him, Irreecha is an event of remembrance of God's promise not to ever destroy the world by flood. It is meant to commemorate the time when God spoke to Noah and reassured him that he would have mercy. Kuma strongly believes that there is no contradiction whatsoever between the Judeo-Christian religious traditions and performances of the Irreecha ritual albeit all Christians insist otherwise. He states his disappointment at the pioneering Oromo evangelicals for having almost intentionally failed to see the link which he believes would have helped them not break away from their forefathers' traditions even if they became Christians. He concludes by saying, "But even if they [evangelicals] were educated and even if they read the Bible, they

were lost in interpreting it.”²⁰ By connecting Irreecha to an ancient civilisation or the biblical traditions, the religious ritual’s depiction was elevated and transformed from a backward superstitious practice to an annual Thanksgiving Day celebrated by millions of Oromo. By contesting representations in the manner exemplified above, a few Oromo intellectuals framed a new way of owning their story, in which their cultural and religious traditions are re-presented by themselves. The newly framed representation (meaning, telling it again but in a different way than told by others) draws heavily on a past that is traced to time immemorial.

One category of these intellectuals is journalists who play roles in disseminating information and knowledge to different sections of the society, Oromo and non-Oromo alike. *Säifä Nābälbal*, a privately owned newspaper that was established in the 1990s, was one of the pioneering private Amharic newspapers owned by Oromo elites. Until it was later banned, it actively promoted Irreecha. The newspaper paid attention to the ritual after MTA’s patronage and the paper served, together with MTA’s own magazine, as the mouthpiece of promoting the ritual. It featured many articles inviting all Oromo to own it and participate in Irreecha. It also promoted a dress code for the event, admonishing celebrants to dress up in the Oromo traditional attire known as *Conni*. In its presentation of the ritual, it took a revisionist approach. For example, an article titled ‘Irreecha’ featured in the newspaper. The article attributed ‘distortions’ in Irreecha to a colonial legacy²¹ that led to the pollution of the Oromo religion, including the practice of Irreecha. According to the writer Debota Haqa, the Oromo were either forced or deceived into letting the colonisers adulterate their ‘pure identity’. Debota urged all concerned Oromo to stand together to challenge this and work towards the restoration of the ‘pure Oromo religion’.²² This ideologically charged claim of purity was visible in consecutive editions of the newspaper, making it a medium through which a counter-narrative regarding Irreecha was channeled. A more recent publication in the *Ethiopian Herald* covered Irreecha as follows. The extended article published on October 7, 2007, was written by Sakuome Dejene.²³ In the description and analysis of the ritual, the writer focused on the history of the Oromo and Irreecha’s

20 The first Afan Oromo journalist. He was the producer of the *Eresa* newspaper, which stopped production for lack of funding.

21 The Oromo question of self-determination is informed by the belief that they are still under the Abyssinian colony (Asafa Jaleta, 1996, 2007).

22 Debota Haka. (1996 EC) *Erreecha bāBirra Mābacha. Säifä Nābälbal*. 16 Mäskäräm, p. 2.

23 Sakuome Dejene (7 October 2007) *Irreecha: Season’s Thanksgiving by the Oromo. The Ethiopian Herald*, p. 7.

connection with other mythological explanations for nature from Indian and Mayan civilisations. While mentioning the past regimes as repressive, the current regime is depicted as a defender of freedom. Moreover, he stated that the ritual had been misunderstood for many years as the worship of trees, mountains and lakes. This is emphatically criticised in the piece. Sakuome further warned that it is incorrect to label Waqqeeffana followers as pagans and their practice as worship of trees and rivers. He also cautioned that people should first try to understand the essence of Irreecha and refrain from depicting it as such. At the end, he requested the Oromo to maintain and promote their identity while still focusing on the grand task of poverty alleviation. This piece was mainly written to address English-speaking readers, who presumably are foreigners, as English is not a vernacular for the majority of Ethiopians. It mainly focused on building an affirmative image of the Oromo, Waqqeeffana and Irreecha.²⁴ In his endeavour to 'clear the confusion', Merga Yonas (2010) wrote in the Reporter newspaper, another English newspaper, that the festivity is the ceremony of thanking Waaqa. He asserted that Irreecha has nothing to do with vowing or expressing gratitude to evil spirits. It is rather an annual holiday of the Waqqeeffana religion, like Easter is for Christians.²⁵

In a documentary on Irreecha in 1994, the TV journalist interviewed a guest from the transitional government's tourism bureau who said:

Irreecha has a significant place among the Oromo and is part of our Gada system. [...] It is pleasing to see it shining like this. As you can see, people are very happy. [...] It is the symbol of our people. It is a day when the Oromo people come together and pray for Waaqa. It is a day when the Oromo thank Waaqa. [...] It is a day of playing the traditional song. The Oromo use this day to reflect on their tradition in general. As for its history, it has a long history of celebration. Some studies connect it with Egypt. It is a day of thanksgiving. It is neither the tree nor the water that the people worship. It is Waaqa who is shown gratitude at this place.²⁶

24 Sakuome Dejene. (2007) Irreecha: Season's Thanksgiving by the Oromo. *The Ethiopian Herald*, 7 October, p. 7.

25 Merga Yonas (2010). Clearing the confusion on Irecha. [Online] Available from: <http://www.ethiopianreview.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=2&t=22311> (15 Jan. 2012) [Accessed 25 March 2013].

26 Interview given to the journalist. Source accessed and transcribed from the videos at ERTA.

Another strand is that of researchers and public intellectuals who conducted work on the ritual in relation to its ethno-nationalist reverberations. The ethno-nationalist overtones have featured in some academic works, like BA and MA theses as well as newspaper articles and blogs. For instance, it is described as “a strong symbol of Oromo identity” (Asebe 2013), “a space of Oromo unity”, “a celebration of peace, stability, development”,²⁷ an arena where the “quest for identity” is expressed (Dejene 2010), a “symbol of political identity” (Hailu 2009), an expression of a return to and pursuit of one’s identity. In the special edition of *Addis Standard* published in October 2016, Buli²⁸ describes Irreecha as inseparable from the Oromo-self and points out its role in consolidating Oromo identity. He asserts that the ritual is an iconic manifestation of Oromo unity, and to attest to this he uses the traditional attire worn during the celebration and writes:

The cultural costumes have been changing in style and fabrics from time to time. They represent every corner of Oromia. The interesting instrumentality of the costumes is that they have gone beyond their locality. Oromos coming from the furthest west corner of Wollega dress themselves with that attire that originated in Arsi, Borena, Harar, Tulema and vice-versa. This signifies an institutionalization of *Oromumma* (being Oromo), as the attires have gone beyond anchoring themselves to a locality, rather uplifted to wider national level. Here, the message is simple: you cannot tell an Oromo from which zone he/she comes by simply looking at his/her attire (2016: p. 16).

In the same volume, Ezekiel Gebissa (2016)²⁹ remarks that Irreecha is a moment in a hallowed land in which the Oromo reproduce and regenerate their identity as Oromo. It also “symbolizes the triumph of an authentic Oromo cultural heritage”, asserting that the ritual has taken on the role of expressing and affirming national identity and unity. In his subtle allusion to the Renanian notion of nation and nationalism, Ezekiel reminds us that Oromo cultural heritage—Irreecha included—has been reclaimed as a pan-Oromo national symbol that signifies a shared historical identity and a site of imagining collective destiny. This speaks to Mekuria’s assertion about the emergence

27 Alemu Serbesa. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (22 November 2013). Mohamed Jilo. Interviewed by Serawit B. Debel. (24 October 2013).

28 Buli Edjeta Jobir. (2016) Into the heart of Irreecha. *Addis Standard*, October, p. 14.

29 Ezekiel Gebissa. (2016) Irreecha: A defining moment in hallowed land. *Addis Standard*, October, pp. 16–18.

of Irreecha as a national culture that reminds the Oromo of the glorious past to which all have to return, as much as this is also a reminder of a history of deprivation and repression.

The following excerpt from the speech Professor Mekuria Bulcha made at the 2013 annual conference organised by the Oromo Studies Association also captures the transformation of Irreecha in its significance.

Irreecha is playing a central role in the revival of Oromo national identity. It is turning into a pan-Oromo movement on the shores of Lake Hora. It is celebrated in the diaspora around the world. In tandem with the growth of Oromo nationalism, the revival of Oromo tradition has become the expression of Oromo unity and identity. The revitalisation of Irreecha is a manifestation of the Oromo sense of belonging to a single societal community that shares an important past and present and looking forward to a common destiny for the future as a nation. Irreecha is a marker of and moments of joy, self-recovery and self-assertion. It is a season of plenty. The festival represents an awakening from a cultural trauma and denigration that went on for centuries. It shows that the dark times when the Oromo traditions have been seen as primitive and pagan have gone once for all. It signifies the beginning of a new era in Oromo history when the Oromo culture is getting recognition as one of the multitudes of cultures in our world. The deep meanings carried by the festival are caught by the performances of young and talented artists. They are brought to the fore from the cultural songs of the Oromo but modernised for the occasion. It is a refutation of Ethiopian misconceptions about the Oromo [as a] bag of diverse cultures and people who do not unite and are not at peace with each other. They do not have history and they do not have heritages and national symbols they share to make them one people. Irreecha gives insights into the pan-Oromo characteristic of the major Oromo traditions. It reveals the historical depth [...] It confirms that the Oromo are a nation of great gatherings and assemblies.³⁰

What Mekuria Bulcha's speech does is not only glorify Irreecha as a symbol of national identity but also deconstruct what he calls 'misconceptions' about the Oromo people in general and their religious traditions in particular. His is

30 The *Irreecha* Festival: From a Suppressed Tradition to a Vibrant Pan-Oromo Movement. Paper presented at the Conference of Oromo Studies Association. [Online] Available from: <http://gadaa.com/OromoStudies/oromo-studies-association-osa-2013-annual-conference-videos/> [Accessed 25 January 2015].

part of the ongoing conversation that is reshaping the complex relations the Oromo have with other ethnic groups and ~~even~~ the successive regimes in the past. In Mekuria's speech, one can clearly see that the Oromo nation is imagined along the lines of Ernest Renan's idea, founded on sharing as a paramount aspect of the making of a nation. To claim a collective possession of heritages lays the foundation upon which a nation is to stand. To share "a glorious heritage and regrets, and having in the future a shared programme to put into effect, or the fact of having suffered, enjoyed and hoped together" are what make a nation (Renan 1990: p. 19). In the sense of the Oromo, religion in general and Irreecha in particular serves as the shared site of a glorious and agonising past, as a binding aspect in the articulation of the Oromo collective identity and the Oromo aspirations as a nation.

Restoring or rediscovering a collective national icon is a way to diminish the culture of the oppressors. The reconfiguration of Irreecha as a national culture is linked directly to the urge to eliminate the upper hand and influence the assimilationist culture of the Abyssinians had on the Oromo and other ethnic groups who were subjected historically.³¹ Therefore, ~~in recent times~~, Irreecha has assumed a meaning that is more than just that of a religious ritual that caters to the spiritual needs of a few devotees. It is also an event where Oromo nationalism is treasured and celebrated. Irreecha has come to be imagined as a banner of Oromo collective identity, which is bonding the Oromo as one nation that owns shared traditions. It has been raised from a local celebration to a pan-Oromo movement representing the revival of Oromo national culture.

Ezekiel argues that Oromo nationalism is an "[o]rganic cultural nationalism built on a shared Oromumma or Oromo identity and collective consciousness buttressed by Oromo political and cultural heritage".³² Oromumma is reflected at Irreecha by its participants, irrespective of religion and region. Because Irreecha is accommodating many other cultural aspects, it has now transformed into an icon of ethno-nationalist expression. Regarding this Asebe Regassa (2013) writes:

31 Feyissa Beyene. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (22 November 2013).

32 He also insists that Oromo nationalism in its current shape is not only just a response to the subjugation and repression by TPLF/EPRDF of post-1991 Ethiopia but also that it is an articulation that is grafted on the roots of Oromumma. The Big Debate—Beyond Assimilation and Accommodation: The Resurgence of Oromo Nationalism. [Online] Available from: https://addisstandard.com/commentary-beyond-assimilation-accommodation-resurgence-oromo-nationalism/#_edn15 [Accessed 9 November 2016].

Irrecha has undergone some transformations in accommodating non-religious aspects of Oromo culture and thus has played a significant role in building Oromo identity and sense of unity. In the contemporary context where the ritual brings Oromo across different walks of life, Irrecha should be understood more as an arena where Oromo identity is articulated, reconstructed, built and practiced.³³

In such a manner Irreecha assumed a quasi-political connotation, symbolising Oromo nationalism and bringing together Oromo of various religious backgrounds but united by their ethnic and ancestral religious identity. It has also been made to reflect a “cultural movement [that] attempts to effectively retrieve and mobilise the original Oromo culture that has been preserved by the Oromo masses” (Asafa 1998: p. 27). As an epitome of a national culture, it represents a spring of salvation, an escape from the domineering Abyssinian culture and a way of securing anchorage. This way of managing Irreecha to create group homogeneity exemplifies how “existing customary traditional practices—folksong, physical contests, marksmanship—[are] modified, ritualised and institutionalised for new national purposes” (Hobsbawm 1983: p. 6).

Articulating Irreecha as a national icon that represents the Oromo cultural identity is meant not only for Oromo consumption but ~~that of~~ other ethnic groups, mainly those who are perceived to have historical relations of domination, competition and controversy with the Oromo. In this case, the transformation of Irreecha into a national culture that symbolises the glory of the Oromo nation is, as much for the Oromo as for external audiences, a way of emphasising their uniqueness. It showcases their difference via self-presentation and representation in a competitive marketplace of identity politics from which the Oromo have been marginalised for centuries. This corresponds to Edward Reeve’s discussion of what rituals in Egypt do and what they are meant for, apart from their spiritual worth. Reeve (1990: p. 4) writes, “Rituals intensify common feelings and beliefs within a group and assert its legitimacy vis-à-vis another group. Thus a ritual has two audiences, inside members of the group and outsiders or members of competing groups. The intent of the ritual performance is to dramatize the differences between these two social categories so that greater legitimacy is accorded the insiders.” Irreecha is a showcase of the tightening of ethnic boundaries within the country in general, but more so the

33 Irrecha: From Thanksgiving Ritual to strong Symbol of Oromo Identity. [Online] Available from: <http://ayyaantuu.com/horn-of-africa-news/oromia/irrecha-from-thanksgiving-ritual-to-strong-symbol-of-oromo-identity/> [Accessed 20 November 2013].

Oromo in relation to their historical rivals, Amhara and Tigray. This strengthening of ethnic boundaries is a reflection of the general trend in the country after ethnicity was configured as the marker of identity based on which regional states are defined, organised and political claims made.

The above discussions are revealing as to what role the Oromo intellectuals played and how they contributed in boosting Irreecha to assume a status of national concern. However, scholars like Ezekiel Gebissa seem to believe otherwise. In a piece titled 'The Big Debate—Beyond Assimilation and Accommodation: The Resurgence of Oromo Nationalism,' Ezekiel Gebissa points out three reasons for which Oromo nationalists are criticised: exploiting the language issue, espousing unrelenting secessionist ideas, and inventing Oromo nationalism. In challenging the third accusation, Ezekiel makes interesting points in defending the grassroots foundation of Oromo nationalism, in the process of which he leaves the Oromo elites out of the whole religious and cultural revival discourses, practices and processes. For him, the "process of reconstruction and reconstitution succeeds not because of the elite's social engineering capacity but on the degree to which their message resonates with the aspirations of the target population. In their effort to return to the past, Oromo nationalists are engaged in a project of self-discovery and collective definition that may lead them to experiment with several alternative visions of the nation over an extended period."³⁴ Although here he appears to acknowledge the place of Oromo intellectuals in the religious and cultural revival, he seems to contradict himself, as the quote below demonstrates. Ezekiel writes:

The revival of Oromo political, religious and cultural heritage is sustained by grassroots institutions organized by local people who have no direct connection with Oromo nationalist elite. There are myriad such cultural institutions that now are the engines of cultural revival. The Abbaa Gadaa local councils with their traditional assemblies located in nearly twenty centers across Oromia are institutions dedicated to the revival and restoration of the gadaa system. The Waaqefanna centers are organized to revive the theology of the faith which promotes peace (nagaa), reconciliation (araara), love (jaalala) and harmony (walta'iinsa) and to provide space for worshipers of the Oromo indigenous religion. There are now several congregations across Oromia organized into five clusters.

34 The Big Debate—Beyond Assimilation and Accommodation: The Resurgence of Oromo Nationalism. [Online] Available from: https://addisstandard.com/commentary-beyond-assimilation-accommodation-resurgence-oromo-nationalism/#_edn15 [Accessed 9 November 2016].

These massive cultural institutions are organized by Oromo elders who voluntarily took up the initiative to recreate Oromo traditional political and religious institutions.

The above two institutions are powerfully expressed together in the celebration of the Irreecha festival. When the festival is celebrated annually at Lake Harsaadii near the town of Bishoftu located about 30 miles southeast of Addis Ababa, it is presided over by the chairperson of the Gumii Abbooti Gadaa (The Union of the Abbaa Gadaa Councils), attended by several million festival attendees. These institutions have their roots in the past but they are quite adapted to the contemporary circumstances. The gadaa institutions that have now reemerged, following many years of rediscovery, are being revived in a way that the present generation can respond to. Abba Gadaa Beyene Senbetu Roobii, president of the Abba Gadaa Council always makes the point of amayeesu (modernizing) the institution. All of this suggests that elites do not have a free hand in “creating” a nation or inventing nationalism.³⁵

However, these claims that snatch credit from the Oromo intellectuals in relation to cultural and religious revival are dismissive, to say the least. It is one thing to credit the grassroots for taking their political and cultural struggles in hand, but another altogether to leave out the intellectuals and political elites as if they are not major stakeholders in the Oromo nationalist struggle and cultural revival. One can hardly ignore the evidence that it was the MTA leadership that for the first time established a Waqkeeffana Followers Association under its patronage, that it was responsible for the creation of a history and culture sub-committee to reach out to the ordinary Oromo, firstly to gain knowledge and secondly to engrain the idea of Oromumma, that it was responsible for the restoration of the Tulema Gada council in the 1990s when it was a patron of Irreecha. It was also the MTA leadership that made Irreecha accessible to and popular among the Oromo elites across religious divides, when ~~for the first time~~ they organised a car for members based in Addis Ababa to come and celebrate Irreecha. Speeches made by intellectuals like Gemetchu Megersa at Hora Arsadi should not be underestimated in elevating cultural revival and also making Irreecha a pan-Oromo heritage event.³⁶

35 The Big Debate—Beyond Assimilation and Accommodation: The Resurgence of Oromo Nationalism. [Online] Available from: https://addisstandard.com/commentary-beyond-assimilation-accommodation-resurgence-oromo-nationalism/#_edn15 [Accessed 9 November 2016].

36 Although my interlocutors do not remember the exact year when Gemetchu made a speech at Hora Arsadi, everyone including Diribi Demissie, speaks fondly of how moving

If we look at the speeches, writings, if we refer to the editions of the Waqqeeffana magazine distributed at Irreecha for years and also draw on the conversations I had, we can see the resonance of what Asafa Jaleta articulates as the task of Oromo intellectuals and politicians. For him, the intellectuals' role is to advance the cause of the Oromo struggle. According to Asafa, due to their repression in the past, the Oromo have been "de-cultured, i.e. Ethiopianised, Somalised, Adarised, and Arabised and rejected their original Oromo identity" (1993: p. 2). They require re-Oromoisation, *inter alia*, by rejecting everything that has been imposed on them by the hegemonic Ethiopian State and the assimilationist national values. Asafa further asserts that the task of the Oromo is deconstructing "the political ignorance, fatalism, and inferiority complex that have chained the minds of the majority of Oromo is the first step toward freedom because the Ethiopian State has no power to control the Oromo nation if significant numbers within the nation develop cognitive liberation by developing nationalist ideology of Oromumma that is replacing the false claim of Ethiopianism" (2015: p. 21).³⁷

In most cases, the educated elites spearhead transformation by initiating discourses which draw on the remote past that is used as a source of historical resources to forge traditions by selecting, modifying and rejecting certain aspects of historical discourses.³⁸ They produced narratives to make sense of the present and counter the grand narratives that dominated the Oromo processes of identity formation. Through counter-productions of perspectives, Oromo intellectuals have contested public perception about Irreecha. In addition, they are involved in the inscription of what they believe is the 'authentic' version of Oromo religious identity. As part of the project of promoting a national culture, the process of rebranding Irreecha and making it suitable for Oromo nationalism is indebted to intellectuals. Thus, following Mekuria, it is safe to argue that the change of the discourse on Irreecha is part of the struggle by Oromo intellectuals to "challenge the denigrating views which were being taught and began to translate their convictions to deeds and concrete actions" (Mekuria 1996: p. 63). Mekuria calls for acknowledging intellectuals' role not

the speech he gave was about the notion of Waqqeeffana and the need to return to one's cultural roots. It is, however, safe to guess that it was in the early 2000s, at the time he was briefly in the leadership of MTA.

37 Oromumma for Asafa (2015) is an anti-thesis of Ethiopianism and instrumental in exposing the ideological ground which is dedicated to perpetuating its colonial position of repressing other peoples. The theory of Oromumma, argues Asafa, is both forward and backward looking at the same time, which makes it practical for liberating the society from the yoke of identity crises.

38 See Hobsbawm (1983).

only in liberating themselves from cultural domination but also in awakening the masses to be more conscious in embracing their cultural and religious roots (Mekuria 1996).

If we evaluate the intellectual history of Oromo through the prism of Irreecha, using Franz Fanon's three phases, we begin to appreciate that they have fought for the nation by first working on themselves. Mekuria Bulcha (1996) agrees with this regarding the role of Oromo intellectuals, as he shows the evolution from accepting the Ethiopiawinet to eventually leading the popular struggle against socio-cultural and political domination. For Fanon, the first phase is where the intellectual is assimilated to the hegemonic culture and dissociates himself from his native cultural roots. If we look at the situation in Ethiopia before the 1960s nationalist movements, people mostly distanced themselves from their ethnic connections. The second phase, at which the intellectual revisits himself and decides to remember what he is, was the point at which associations like MTA turned their faces towards previously ignored cultural traditions. In the third phase, the intellectual becomes a fighter for and mouthpiece of the people, and it is at this stage that more radical actions begin to be taken in promoting national cultures. The culture that is 'discovered' in the repository of the past is often juxtaposed with the one it counters; in the case of the Oromo, for example, against the Ethiopianist category. Notwithstanding their inestimable contribution in this phase, the intellectuals also fall in the trap of Fanon's criticism, which is that intellectuals tend to reproduce static culture and ignore the centrality of change in the life of those whom they try to awaken. For instance, Irreecha is presented as a self-evident cultural artefact which does not account for the contingent and dynamic nature of people's lives. In this sense, the intellectuals promote nothing "more than a stock of particularisms", to quote Fanon (1967: p. 42). Just as we know it in the negritude movement that rose against the colonial depiction of Africa, the Oromo intellectuals propagate a totalising national culture to represent all, and by so doing writes off internal differentiations in the service of establishing 'great' people with their own homogenous, grand religious and cultural tradition—people that can stand at par with those of the oppressors. In this case, 'culture' becomes that which basically ignores the lived realities and histories as well as experiences of people across time and space, which is not cognisant of the fact that things are in constant motion and renewal. This might make sense as a political project that is used as a precondition for liberation struggles, serving as what Craig Calhoun calls "the preeminent discursive form for modern claims to political autonomy and self-determination" (1993: p. 213). Oromo intellectuals and politicians critique the fact that Oromo culture and religion, as well as socio-political institutions like the Gada, were belittled

and undermined, and an Abyssinian identity was imposed on the Oromo. They rejoice in re-discovering their identity in a new light. This search for salve in the past is a tool to fight to reclaim one's dignity, which has been taken away by the oppressive structure. The discovery of such a culture becomes a source of delight and evidence attesting to the existence of a past with which one identifies proudly.

Nevertheless, the nationalist discourse in general, and the one that is projected on Irreecha where a seemingly agreed upon meaning exists, strips the ritual of internal dynamics and complexities as well as multiplicities of meanings that are produced in accordance with how different participants experience it. The underlying assumption that seems to guide the propagation of a grand narrative is that there is an imagined Oromo nation that all aspire to belong to. This imagined nation is articulated either based on the history of the Oromo before the 16th century movement or based on the living 'authentic' Oromo, who according to Asmerom Legesse (1973, 2001), are the Borana, the most conservative segments. The rest is deviation and does not fit into the historic Oromo nation that is represented by the Borana of today. Deviations are problems for which there must be a remedy—which is sought in the homogenising nationalist project that looks both backwards to trace its origins and forward to the liberated future. And yet, this inflation of Irreecha into a national culture flattens the internal dynamics and complexity of subjectivities across gender, generation, religious conviction, educational background, political persuasion and so on.

Irreecha's emergence as a homogenous national culture subjugated, normalised, abnormalised, magnified and invisibilised other ways of being and becoming. The problem with the idea of Irreecha as a national culture is that it presupposes a singularity of meaning and thereby reproduces the hegemony it sets out to challenge. Despite the fact that it has become a crucial resource in reaffirming the Oromo as a nation that has what it takes, it is not unproblematic. Oromoness, and by the same logic Irreecha, are presented as fixed and natural identities that have no history and complexity and hence are devoid of change and multiplicity. However, apart from the identity politics that ethnic federalism and/or Oromo nationalist discourses promote, Irreecha is a space for the formation of multiple identities. Yet there is a danger of excluding and subordinating certain groups who do not 'fit' the prescribed culture in the name of unity. If we go by Fanon's articulation of culture as "the expression of a nation, the expression of its preferences, of its taboos and its patterns", the refashioning of Irreecha to fit this imaginary is a textbook example of one. Refashioning Irreecha as yet another edifice within Oromumma and the resulting Oromo subjectivity detaches it from other specificities and nuances.

This refashioning is problematic for it is predicated on displacing those who disrupt what Gemetchu Megersa (1996: p. 92) calls “the totality of the Oromo culture”. As will be taken up in the next chapter, one of the major problems with this project is that it excludes and marginalises by creating its own ‘subalterns’. I delve into spirit mediums and women to show who and what practices the homogenising project of national culture subordinates and argue that mediums, mediumship and women are subjected to what Susan Reed (2010) calls the “poetics of detachment”.

Contestations

Marginalisation of certain experiences and narratives is the downside of highly romanticised nationalist discourses on national icon. If as Gow (2004) says, Oromo nationalism is exclusionist, like most others, it is characterised by layers of exclusion in the context of Irreecha. Women and spirit mediums seem to be the main groups subjected to marginalisation in the discourses and practices of sanitising Irreecha. But, the subordinating tendencies of the notion of Oromumma are nowhere more visible than they are in the disparagement of spirit mediumistic ritual performances ~~in the context of Irreecha~~. As I have alluded in the first chapter, mediums and their ritual performances are the most consistent aspects before, during and after the ‘officially’ recognised celebration. ~~As it stands now, they~~ represent the most ethnically diverse part of Irreecha at Hora Arsadi, and curiously, the majority of participants who perform various rituals under the sacred tree are women. These gender and ethnic dimensions become more pronounced, introducing complex forms of relationships within the context of the ritual celebration. While discussing mediumship and the attempt to remove its practitioners, I delve into discourses mobilised by religious institutions, namely the Waqqueffatas, Christians (evangelical and Ethiopian Orthodox) and Muslims as well as their apparent collaboration with authorities who work in the culture and tourism bureau of the regional state and Bishoftu city. It is not only the authorities and the religious institutions, but some intellectuals also take an active part in the vilification ~~and the ensuing epistemic violence~~ of everything the subordinated regard as sacred knowledge and practices. And yet, refuting their denigration, the mediums and their followers claim centrality to the ritual by affirming themselves as the necessary condition for the very existence of Irreecha. In their view, Irreecha becomes an empty signifier without reference to the benevolent spirits. Here, I draw on the notion of “poetics of detachment” developed by Susan Reed, where she means the “severing of practices [and certain actors] from their contexts for the purpose of exhibition” (2010: p. 4).

1 Mediumship at Hora Arsadi

Years of sidelining mediums and mediumship reached its climax on 29 September 2012, when the city municipality and the Aba Gada Tulema

Council agreed to prohibit the mediums from spending the eve of Irreecha at Hora Arsadi. Lomi Deme, herself a medium based in Bishoftu, expressed her bafflement as to how anyone could try to stop possession and the related rituals while both are essentially connected to Irreecha. She states that delega (possession trance) and Irreecha are connected and interdependent.

We cannot take delega out and talk about Irreecha. Delega is a state of mind; it is the spirit's action. It is the spirit that makes someone act the way they do. One comes here, gets close to the lake or the tree and connects with the spirit that then leads to trance. Those who have problems, be it personal or family issues, come here to talk to the spirit, and solve their problems. No one does delega for a joke; it is something serious and uncontrollable. It is done for the benefit and reward the spirit gives its devotees. It is not for the water or the tree that people do delega, it is the spirit itself that acts out. Those of us who do delega have been chosen by the spirit as its channel. It is a higher manifestation of the spirit.¹

According to Kebede Tikse, an elder who takes the spirits seriously, it is not proper to forbid rituals for the spirits at Hora Arsadi since the Malka itself came to be sacred through spirit revelation. It was because of the spirit that spoke through the girl (see chapter 2) that people came to know about Hora Arsadi. The spirit conveyed what it wanted the adherents to do.² Belay Shiferaw, also a long-time practitioner, asserts that the lake's history is clearly associated with spirits and their manifestation in the form of possession. It is not without reason that people including the spirit mediums go to Hora Arsadi. The spirits linger there on days like Irreecha. It is unstoppable, and this makes any attempt to remove the mediums from Irreecha untenable.³ Possession at Hora Arsadi is pertinent because the spirit reveals itself for people who come to the sacred lake and one cannot tell the spirit not to possess its host.

Long-time practitioners of the ritual argue that the possession trance has always been a part of the ritual, although downplayed under the past regimes.⁴ Since 1991, as opposed to the situation in the past, the increase in the number of adherents celebrating Irreecha has been accompanied by what is known as Hadra mäsab, which is a practice of invoking the spirits through singing. As a result of the growing invocation, the instances and energy of possession

1 Lomi Deme. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (5 October 2013).

2 Kebede Tikse. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (16 March 2013).

3 Belay Shiferaw. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (23 July 2012).

4 Lomi Deme. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (5 October 2013).

trance also increased. The flourishing of spirit invocation through singing on the main day as well as the weeks after Irreecha is partly the result of the religious freedom declared following the change of government, according to Debebe Kasse, also a devout follower,

In the past, there was almost no Hadra mäsab because people were not comfortable with the political situation. They were afraid of criticism and during the Därg regime, it even went beyond criticism. People [adherents] never sat down together like they do now for Hadra mäsab. This has changed after the new government announced [religious] freedom for all. All feel more confident to do it in public. There is no more hiding. The spirit visits its people when they sing to call it. Therefore, the singing that used to be carried out behind closed doors has now become a thing of public engagement, as you can see.⁵

However, some groups and individuals were looking at this with their eyebrows raised. The question then is: What is it that is unsettling about the practices of mediumship at Hora Arsadi, to the extent that it unites forces against mediums, and what they do? Is there a distinctly gendered aspect to this, and what do women have to do in these processes? In what follows, I describe the position of religious groups.

2 Waqqeeffana

Let us begin with the Waqqeeffatas and their take on the issue. Waqqeeffatas are a group of Oromo people who practice what they believe is a distinctly Oromo religion centring Waaqa as the only one deserving undivided devotion. And Waqqeeffana is a name given to the religion. The Waqqeeffana Followers Association (henceforth WFA) and its active presence in the Irreecha celebration has obviously added colour to the religious diversity witnessed at the celebration. As much as it boosts the aesthetics, it also complicates the ritual as it introduces actors whose take on the ritual and the notion of Waqqeeffatas is diverse. Waqqeeffatas like Feyissa Beyene, also a key actor in the formation of the Waqqeeffatas Association, and Caalaa Sori, a Waqqeeffata who works in the tourism office of Bishoftu, are ~~totally~~ against what happens both on the day of the celebration and on ordinary days. For them, the spirit related activities are recent additions to the Oromo belief system. They believe Irreecha should

⁵ Debebe Kasse. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (23 November 2013).

not be associated with the activities of the mediums at all, as they have nothing to do with the Oromo way of worshipping Waaqa. They refer to the spirit related activities as alien. Some even go to the extent of accusing other ethnic groups of adulterating the Oromo religious beliefs and ritual practices by introducing such elements. To them, what is worse is that for many years mediums at Hora Arsadi have done a lot of harm that resulted in painting a bad image of the Oromo as spirit worshippers. This is regarded as a disgrace to the Oromo nation because it creates a false image of the people as pagans and animists, while the Oromo are believers only in one Waaqa according to Caalaa. Caalaa further states that since the celebration at Hora Arsadi is filled with cultural events, the mediums are not supposed to have any role that is different from the rest of the participants. The Gada Council and tourism offices are leading and organising Irreecha as something that is predominantly cultural. The Aba Gada should not involve himself in dhibayu (libation), or the coffee ceremony. His role is to lead the people to the Malka and to recite prayers and blessings in addition to commemorating the day as a national celebration dedicated to the reassertion of Oromo identity.⁶

According to Biru Tsegaye, a journalist and a self-taught historian, endorsing mediums is a danger for the image of the Oromo religion in general. He says that some people disparage the Oromo as if they worship the tree or as if they believe in the existence of spirits in the lake, and this is because of the possession trance and other related acts performed by the lake and under the tree.⁷ Similarly, for Dandi Negewo, there is no spirit possession, food throwing or libation among the Oromo as part of their religion. He asserts that “the spirit possession thing started after the change of government”. Dandi, an anthropologist who works in the regional state’s culture and tourism bureau, believes that trance is something that has to be removed if the regional state is serious about promoting the true face of Oromo culture and religion.⁸ Alemu Serbesa, a historian working at the culture and tourism bureau of the regional state, asserts that these are “corrupt practices” which result in “aesthetic deformation” at Hora Arsadi. For him, the people who perform such unrecognised rituals have misunderstood the essence of Irreecha and Waqqeeffana. What happens

6 Focus Group Discussion with the organisers of the Waqqeeffata group. Conducted by: Serawit B. Debele. (23 March 2013). Aba Gada Beyene Senbeto. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (27 November 2013). For a detailed account of WFA’s youth members, their relationship with Hora Arsadi and the regional state see: Serawit 2017b, 2018.

7 Aba Sena Biru Tsegaye. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (28 January 2013).

8 Dandi Negewo. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (5 October 2013). This view is shared by Tesfaye Muleta, a historian and doctoral student at Addis Ababa University. (Personal communication, 3 November 2013).

on the day or the weeks after the main Irreecha regarding spirit possession is not Irreecha but rather a continuation of the corrupt practices, which should not be recognised by anyone as part of Oromo religion.⁹

This, however, is not the whole story with regard to the representation of the Waqqeeffana religious group. There are others who maintain that mediumship and reverence for the spirit are integral parts of Oromo religion and hence central to Irreecha celebrations. So, not every member of WFA is against mediums. For instance, Diribi Demissie, ~~chairperson of the reinstated MTA,~~ and Nagasa Nagawo, the Aba Gada before Beyene Senbeto, both of whom played key roles in the revitalisation of Waqqeeffana under the auspices of MTA and who also identify as Waqqeeffatas, do not have a problem with the possession trance, pouring libations or food and other votive offerings. They believe it is part of the Oromo religious tradition.¹⁰ Professor Mesfin Abebe and Kuma Ide'a are also among those who strongly believe in the spirits' might. A significant number of Oromo youth who identify as Waqqeeffatas also endorse mediumship because they are of the belief that Waaqa assigned the spirits. They respect and take part in the rituals for the reverence of the spirits, both on the main day of the celebration and on ordinary day gatherings at the sacred lake. In Kuma's view, one does not choose to hold or not to hold a coffee ceremony at the Malka, one must have received some kind of order to do so. Proscribing those who are directed by the spirit to do things at the lakeside, he believes, will soon cause the nation great harm. He believes that organisers of the celebration are inviting punishment by denigrating the spirits. What spirit mediums do, according to Kuma, sustains the nation because they are praying for peace, stability, harvest, cattle and children. Barring them means taking measures that might have apocalyptic consequences on a larger scale.¹¹ According to Tasew Tessema, a historian based at the Addis Ababa University,

9 Alemu Serbesa. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (22 November 2013). The expressions aesthetic deformation, corrupt practice are directly quoted as told by interlocutor Alemu Serbesa, who used English to express what he believes are inappropriate.

10 Diribi Demissie. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (20 October 2013). Nagasa Nagawo. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (25 November 2012).

11 Mesfin Abebe. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (23 March 2013). Kuma Idea. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (16 February 2013 and 20 November 2013). I returned to Hora Arsadi in 2018 and spoke to a few people. My informal conversation about what happened in 2016 revealed to me that the gatekeepers and some women I spoke to think that it was a punishment from the gods. They believe that because the spirituality of the practice and the sacredness of the area are degraded, the divine showed its might. What is more interesting for the likes of Debebe Kasse, for example, is the fact that nothing happened by the lakeside and under the tree. All the atrocities occurred far away, so for Debebe it is symbolic that the further away you are from the centre, the less protected you become.

also a staunch Waqqueeffata, those who argue that the Oromo do not worship the spirits but Waaqa alone are simply showing disrespect to the Oromo way of doing things. They are manifesting how embarrassed they are by the way their parents and grandparents related to their creator. Mediumship is negated as unfit because Irreecha is presented as a reinvention and rearticulation of Oromo spirituality through the lens of monotheism, which certain groups of WFA are borrowing from Christianity.¹²

3 Christians (Evangelical and Ethiopian Orthodox) and Muslims

A significant number of evangelical Christians have become active participants in the Irreecha celebration since its association with the Oromo collective identity and the political overtones that the ritual carries. And yet, they are against practices that involve spirit possession and that what goes on in the course of the Irreecha celebration does not sit well with their religious convictions. As a result, they contest mediumship and strive to redefine Irreecha as an Oromo cultural event. One of the approaches the evangelical Christians take to displace the spirit mediums is using their connection with people of authority. Both the Bishoftu city municipality and tourism office are staffed by a substantial number of evangelicals who are in favour of removing mediumship from Hora Arsadi. These staff members are key actors in the organisation of the ritual at the local level. They have the power to decide on many matters related to the celebration and celebrants. As speculative as it sounds, many believe that local authorities are behind the abuse and harassment of mediums and their followers at Hora Arsadi. In our conversations, Mesfin Abebe mentioned individuals he knew in both offices who denounce mediums and mediumship and who are always trying to dissociate Irreecha from such persons and practices.¹³

The local authorities who are in charge of organising the ritual are caught between two positions, the religious and the professional. Their position in the state apparatus, either as civil servants or politicians, dictates their presence in the ritual as organisers, whereas their religious conviction forces them

The ethnography of the post-violence at Hora Arsadi is an interesting point of entry to further investigate.

12 Tasew Tessema. Professor at Addis Ababa University. (Personal communication, 7 November 2013).

13 Mesfin Abebe. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (23 March 2013).

to avoid events “where the evil spirits are revered”.¹⁴ Thus, they have to devise various mechanisms to negotiate their position without compromising their political and religious commitments. To this end, they actively work to ‘purify’ Irreecha of its spirit-related associations so that it becomes convenient for all.¹⁵ This argument by medium advocates is further corroborated by what I observed on the eve of the celebration in 2013. In collaboration with the regional state’s bureau, the local officials prepared an invitation card for the event. They invited only a few selected participants and left others out. On the invitation card, it was stated that the guests were invited to attend the panel discussion, the street show and the trade fair. Since the panel was organised for the purpose of “creating the right image of Irreecha”, one would expect the representation of diverse stakeholders to debate the issue. There were, however, no spirit mediums invited other than the ones who conform to the authority’s prescriptions. Moreover, Kuma Ide’a, is of the view that even the few sympathisers they invited, like himself, were not given the chance to speak since it is known that they would have spoken in support of the mediums.¹⁶ According to Tadesse Muleta, the previous Aba Malka, the war against mediums is based on a superficial claim that comes from a few members of the Oromo elite who do not understand the relevance of mediumship.¹⁷

Missionising on ordinary days as well as the day of the main celebration is another approach evangelicals take. On ordinary days, they go to Hora Arsadi to preach and/or criticise those who perform different rituals ~~there~~. They try to convince practitioners that what they do is wrong and against the teachings of Jesus. They also tell them that they have to stop revering the spirit and accept Jesus as their one and only saviour if they are to find eternal salvation. Young evangelicals also go to the area when there is no one around and write quotes from the Bible on the sacred tree and on the stone on which people sit to perform the rituals.¹⁸ This missionising work gets more intense on the day and week of the celebration. For instance, at the celebration of Irreecha in 2013, a large number of P’énté (a word used in the area to refer to evangelicals or Pentecostals) were busy distributing leaflets published both in Amharic and Oromifa languages to sensitise the participants, sermonising against the ritual

14 I was told by a theologian from the Biftu Bole evangelical church that any Christian, Oromo or not, should not take part in such events as they contradict the teachings of Christianity and the Bible.

15 Mesfin Abebe. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (23 March 2013). Kuma Ide’e also shares the view.

16 Kuma Idea. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (16 February 2013 and 20 November 2013).

17 Tadesse Muleta. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (20 November 2013).

18 Mesfin Abebe. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (23 March 2013).

in general and the spirit mediums in particular.¹⁹ Even though there was no overt backing extended to them by officials, the Evangelicals were not stopped from infringing on other people's religious rights.

According to Mamo, the issue is that "unlike the situation in the past when there was no freedom of religion for evangelicals and when everyone was visibly hostile towards them, these days there are a lot of evangelicals who move around and tell people to abandon their religion and convert".²⁰ Mamo's assertion is supported by Kuma, who says:

During the emperor or Därg, the evangelicals were a minority and they did not even have the confidence to walk on the street like others, let alone coming here to harass us. Now the time [has] changed, there is much freedom and they are using it to stop [people from following] the religion of our ancestors. There was none during the past regimes that were bothering us like they do now. The non-Akerari is an Amharic word for a fanatic. Orthodox Christians do not disturb us because we are also Orthodox Christians.²¹

What adds another layer to the complexity of the matter is the invitation of guests from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church to come and make speeches at the event on the day of the celebration. Qäsis Belay Mekonnen, a priest and member of the OPDO, is one such prominent figure who comes to celebrate Irreecha and speak publicly against mediumship. According to Qäsis Belay, Irreecha has nothing to do with spirit possession and all the related rituals. From his point of view, spirit mediumship is alien to the Oromo religion. Belay strongly argues that the Oromo are believers in one Waaqa and have never revered any spirits. He takes his presence as an opportunity to 'educate' people about what he argues is the true essence of Oromo religion and what Irreecha is all about. According to Qäsis Belay:

Irreecha used to be religious as well as cultural in the past but in the modern times it is a cultural celebration. It is culture but if one argues that it is a religious celebration, then it is problematic. The Christians and the Muslims do not have anything religious to perform here so they would

19 Hiikaa: Hayyuu Oromoo (Hiikaa: the great Oromo intellectual) is the leaflet that was distributed on 29 September 2013 by a group of young Oromo P'éntés as celebrants walked towards the lake for the ritual.

20 Mamo Gada. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (24 March 2013).

21 Kuma Idea. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (20 November 2013).

not ~~go to~~ celebrate at Hora Arsadi. For instance, I would not go there if it were a religious holiday. I do not go there to do anything that contradicts Christianity. Oromo do not worship trees, do not worship beads; these are aesthetic items. They also have nothing to do with spirits other than Waaqa. In essence, their belief is similar to Christianity.²²

From the assertions of Qäsis Belay, one can clearly see the tendency to reconfigure Irreecha as a cultural event. As can be deduced from his argument above, culture is conceptualised as something that is free from spiritual influence. He is making a distinction between religion and culture and thereby calling for a process of leaving the spirituality aside to expand the event for the appreciation of the wider public, non-believers included. As he mentioned above, unless Irreecha was redefined as a cultural event, it would not be possible to develop it into a pan-Oromo festival ~~with which all Oromo can relate~~. If this is not the case, he makes the point that Muslims and Christians would not have any reason to attend the celebration. This argument resonates with the work of the regional state as they endeavour to reframe Irreecha as an all-inclusive cultural festival.

Qäsis Belay states that his intention to confront the mediums is what forced him to go to Hora Arsadi. He says that he was determined to go and do something about the situation before it got worse. As an Oromo priest, he felt the need to stop this as he could not see ‘his own people’ go astray while he could go and speak to them in a language they understand. According to Belay, it is his responsibility to teach his people instead of joining “those other people who do not understand the situation but ridicule my people and laugh at them. For me this is not fair as it means I am betraying my roots”. Describing his observations, he says:

People act like they are mad on that day. They go into a trance and shout like crazy. Looking at this, I thought I should go and teach the people and make sure they are not on the wrong track. I went the first time to just observe what was going on. I acted like an ordinary person. Instead of my clerical clothing, I put on a casual jacket so that people do not notice that I am a priest. The next year, I got permission²³ and went there with

²² Qäsis Belay Mekonnen. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (26 March 2013).

²³ Belay never wanted to disclose which authority gave him the permission to teach people on the event of the celebration. I asked an official in the local Culture and Tourism office in Bishoftu town, and he told me that he came to participate in the event just because he is an Oromo priest who was concerned and felt the need to correct the wrong that is associated with the ritual, particularly because of the mediumship. One can deduce that

the regional state's officials. After a few of years of going, now everybody knows me. Every time I speak, I say it clearly that those ones who do delega are Satan and I mean that. If what they have is [the] Holy Spirit, it will not do this to them. They will not act like mad people. They will not lose self-control; they will not throw themselves on the ground. The Holy Spirit cures the sick people; it does not drive them crazy. I believe, this is not ours, not of the Oromo, it is of Satan. I said this is a backward tradition this is not a proper culture. Culture is an expression of a certain group of people; it is something dignified and is a source of pride.²⁴

Here, Belay is giving reasons why he is confronting the practice of mediumship. According to him, mediumship is backward because it makes some people behave like they are mad. Although he seems to reluctantly agree that mediumship is part of the Oromo religious tradition, he says it is "not a proper culture"; it is embarrassing rather than being a source of pride for the Oromo. Belay believes that since he started his teachings the 'craze' has subsided. He states that he has been effective to the extent that the mediums are now fearful and discouraged to do their rituals at least on the main day. His usage of 'craze' to describe what goes under the sacred tree at Hora Arsadi is informed by his Christian background which defines anything that does not conform to the church's teachings as 'abnormal and disorderly'. As such, he believes he has a double-responsibility, both as an Oromo and as an Orthodox Christian priest, to correct the abnormal and tame the 'disorder'.²⁵

It is not surprising that Muslims are also engaged in the venture of detaching Irreecha from the spirit mediums, albeit with a lesser degree of involvement. Generally, in the Islamic religious tradition, Irreecha is perceived as a ritual practice that does not go hand in hand with Islam. Muslims are encouraged to distance themselves from participating in the ritual, although a significant number of them celebrate Irreecha.²⁶ Some of those who go to the lake

since what he does serves the interest of the government officials, he could be invited by the authorities to make a speech at the event that is directed against mediumship.

24 Qäsis Belay Mekonnen. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (26 March 2013).

25 In the course of this contestation and debate regarding spirit mediumship during the celebration of Irreecha, one could discern three categories of Christian participants: Christians who go to Hora Arsadi to participate in the ritual but are indifferent to the practice of mediumship; Christians who actively participate in the mediumship; and Christians who go to Hora Arsadi to participate in the thanksgiving ritual but also take issue with the practice of mediumship. From this simplified categorisation, one can see that Irreecha and what in entails as a thanksgiving ritual means different things to different sets of participants.

26 Mohammed Muhe. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (20 March 2013).

on the day of the celebration assert that one needs to differentiate between the original Oromo religious practice, which does not contradict Islam, and the inauthentic. For instance, in an interview with a television journalist, a Muslim participant asserted that the activities taking place under the tree were not connected to the Oromo culture or religious belief. For him, the *delega* is a result of the Amhara expansion to Oromo land that brought with it those spirit related rituals. Accordingly, he states:

The Oromo never had anything to do with spirits until the Amhara brought this to the region. Zar or jinn spirits that drive people mad and make them act wildly do not belong to the Oromo. Many Muslims come here to celebrate Irreecha. I am a Muslim Oromo. It is important that we come here because it is our responsibility to stop these activities. It is our responsibility as followers of the religion of the book to come here and educate people to stop adulterating the Oromo culture.

ETV Oct. 3, 1994

The fact that the interviewee ethnicised the issue hints at new developments in the country, where cleavages are expanding, especially between the Amhara and the Oromo. By projecting the undesirable onto the Amhara, the person implies that the Oromo used to be followers of a pure religion until they were subjugated by the Amhara, who then imposed on them Orthodox Christianity and other superstitious practices. For him, this religious ‘confusion’ is what brought about an unwanted addition. His discourse fits well with the nationalist narrative that romanticises the Oromo as followers of one of the ancient monotheistic religions.

The perspectives of antagonists such as Qäsis Belay are refuted by the mediums and their sympathisers. For instance, according to Nagasa, individuals who accuse the Oromo of worshiping Satan/evil spirit and want to forbid *delega* and other activities should look into the history of the Oromo religion. In the first place, the Oromo do not know evil spirits. They do not have the concept of Satan and do not even mention this name. But people have different interpretations of the Oromo belief based on their own skewed understandings of the practice. He argues that P’énté also have spirits. As far as noise generated during a trance is concerned, Pentecostal Christians are noisier. Orthodox Christians also believe in spirits. They believe in the spirit that possesses believers. He then questions “What makes ours wrong and theirs right? Who are they to say this one is alien and this one is ours?” According to him, participants who go to celebrate Irreecha and criticise things taking place there are

people who try to compare their religion with others and say theirs is better.²⁷ Based on this, many argue that if spirit related practice is alien and needs to be abolished or demonised, there is no reason to save the EOC and P'éntés while focusing on the mediumship practice at Hora Arsadi or anywhere else.²⁸ Similarly, Kuma expresses his discontent about the action of the Orthodox priest Qäsis Belay, saying, "The Orthodox priest also comes here and tells us to stop believing in the spirit and tells us to throw our ritual items away. He does not know anything. As an Oromo, he should have been proud of the fact that his ancestors kept this intact and also that the current generation is doing it due to its paramount role in keeping all of us safe".²⁹

Furthermore, the members of the 'Ethiopian Oromo Gada Waqqeeffana Ayyana Protection and Care Development Association' (I will discuss the association in detail in the coming sections) respond in different ways. Since most of them belong to either Orthodox Christianity or Islam, they seem to be aware of the internal dynamics. As a result, they have come up with the category of Akerari (fanatic) Orthodox Christians, referring to those who have extreme positions. They assert that mediums had less problems in the past, themselves being Orthodox Christians, except the denigrating speeches made against them in the church premises. This was the case until the Akeraris started participating in Irreecha. For instance, a board member of the association, Amsalu Tolesa reflected on the derogatory expressions the P'énté and the Akerari Orthodox Christians use against the spirit mediums. According to her:

The world has two sides—negative and positive. Religion is also two-sided. There is the holy and there is the Devil. Our problem with others is on this division. Theirs is holy; ours is Satan. That is not acceptable to us. Who said this division is right? Did God tell them so? It is this division that has to be questioned. One must closely investigate each before saying what is of Satan and of God. How do they know whether what we do is the work of the evil spirit? We Ayyantus are chosen by the creator to fulfill God's words. As long as we keep the division, there cannot be reconciliation. I cannot continue being referred to as a representative of Satan. Until now, we did not have anyone to debate on our behalf; this is

27 Nagasa Nagawo. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (25 November 2012).

28 Focus Group Discussion with coffee session attendants at Hora Arsadi. Conducted by: Serawit B. Debele. (22 December 2012).

29 Kuma Idea. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (16 February 2013).

what we are trying to do now. Although we started it late, we still have time to influence the derogatory discourse.³⁰

In response to those who say that the Oromo believe in stone or river or tree, the members of the association react by interrogating the Ethiopian Orthodox Church's concept of the arc of the covenant. In this regard, they argue that, unlike the EOC, the ritual objects that the mediums revere are not handmade but God-given, and they assert that there is nothing wrong with revering what God created.

From the foregoing discussion, it is clear that the contestation of Irreecha by certain religious groups is informed by their definition of other religious practices in relation to their own. This relational *re*definition demonises what is non-Christian and non-Islamic. Condemning the indigenous religious practices as manifestations of evil spirits entails the belief that they are powerful and their might emanates from the Devil. It is the task of the 'righteous' religions to protect people from such entrapments and bring them to the light. This serves as a justification to assault the mediums, as Dea (2005: pp. 4–5) writes below:

The meaning and image of the spirit mediums as well as a range of other cultural practices, which fell outside the fold of Christian values as understood by a specific organisation, are disapproved. In short, those cultural practices that appear unacceptable when seen from the perspective of a certain understanding of Christianity are attributed to Satanic worship and they are fused with the Christian critique of traditional religion.

The disapproval was more pronounced in post-1991 Ethiopia with the revival of Evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity. The declaration of religious freedom opened up the religious market and the number of competitors increased. The EOC's historical monopoly of the religious landscape ended and it was also forced to compete with others. The Church began to be criticised by the Evangelicals and Pentecostals for its tolerance of and inaction against these 'superstitious' practices, and this seems to have contributed to the EOC's militancy against the mediums and Irreecha in general.³¹ Even in the face of competition with each other, Irreecha's growing public presence is exasperating to

30 Amsalu Tolesa. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (18 January 2013).

31 In my discussion with officials from both the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and Biftu Bole Oromiffa Evangelical Church, I have found out that the institutions have not yet openly denounced Irreecha. However, both institutions are against the practice.

all institutions, precisely because most Oromo participants belong to either one of them. The popularity of Irreecha is felt to be a threat, as it means that people leave their old home for their newfound Oromo religion.³² Two strands of competition can be identified here. On the one hand, there is competition between the Oromo religion and the two Christian denominations, while on the other hand there is competition between the two denominations to win more Oromo souls as well as to retain the ones they have.³³ In this process, (re) appropriation of Irreecha rather than a total rejection of it is the main strategy. Rejecting Irreecha, at least openly, would be costly for both institutions due to its increased acceptance by a large number of Oromo. One main reason why the two institutions have not officially denounced Irreecha and Waqqeeffana in general could be attributed to the increasing popularity of the ritual. If the institutions reject the ritual, it will lead to public discontent and even worse, abandonment of the so-called official religions. Aware of this risk, the ~~radical~~ criticism remains subtle and something that happens within the circles of the church ~~officials~~. Instead, they have opted for selective criticism whereby they advocate the sifting out of some rituals with which they do not agree. In such a manner, they are participating in the celebration while denying that it is a ritual that involves mediumship.

This contestation of practices that are considered unsavoury to a pure religion of the Oromo are depicted by some as 'superstitions' that exist within the religious tradition of the Oromo who are otherwise 'strict' followers of none but Waaqa. Martial de Salviac is notorious for his comparison of the Oromo religion to the notions of Christianity and making disparaging remarks like superstition about other practices he never understood or never approved of (De Salviac 1901). His scholarship seems to have a strong following in justifying and asserting a monotheistic idea of Oromo religion that rejects other forms of spiritualities and rituals as unWaaqa.

The problem with such contestations is that they are based on the normative provisions of each religious institution, which completely ignores religion in the everyday life of practitioners. The normative view does not account for the lived realities, practices and experiences of those who live the religions as

32 Mamo Gada. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (24 March 2013).

33 The competition between the religious institutions in Ethiopia becomes even more interesting if one pays attention to the ever-increasing number of Protestants. In 1994, Christians constituted 61.6 percent of the total population out of which only 10.1 percent were Protestants. The 2007 census reveals that the number of Protestant Christians has risen by 18.6 percent, which is apparently alarming to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as it is losing its constituency.

an integral part of their lives. For instance, the claim of distancing Islam from the ritual as well as sanctifying Irreecha becomes problematic as one pays attention to the spirit mediums and the rituals they perform. I have encountered a possession trance where a Muslim spirit possessed an Orthodox Christian woman. So, when the spirit is active in her, she does what she is ordered to do, which could be something along the Islamic religious lines. On one of the days I was visiting Hora Arsadi, I saw a woman medium putting on a kind of dress that is typical for Muslims, at least in the Ethiopian context. Joining her coffee ritual, I soon found out that she is, however, an Orthodox Christian woman who is equally dedicated to the Christian faith. The attire she put on while coming to Hora Arsadi was in accordance with the interest of a Muslim-oriented spirit she is hosting. She is an agent of multiplicity of religious practices.³⁴

Furthermore, the terms borrowed from Islamic religious practices are strikingly numerous. For instance, words like *Jemma*, *Hadra* and *Awäleia* are borrowed and commonly used by the mediums at Hora Arsadi as well as in their respective homes. This is a manifestation of the hybridised religious practices, countering a claim to an essentially 'pure' normative Islam, Christianity or Waqqueffana. However, as indicated above, the institutional religions emphasise and redefine the monotheistic feature of Oromo religion that singles Waaqa out as the only important spiritual entity. In turn, this represents Oromo religion as theologically resonant to their conception of the true religion, which revolves around a single supernatural being, either God or Allah. Both the Christian and Muslim opponents of the practice of mediumship are endeavouring to find a matching point between their own religious principles and doctrines and what is practiced in the celebration of Irreecha. This leads to the discourse that holds, "We are basically worshipping the same God, it is just the language of expression and the practice that is slightly different".³⁵ This turns out to be the shortcut solution some Oromo resorted to in order to keep from compromising their religious and ethnic identities. It is a sort of 'structural double game', according to Bourdieu (1998: p. 115), whereby individuals engage with certain practices while at the same denying their existence, or at least the existence of some elements which they do not wish to accept.

34 Field notes 2012, 2013, 2015.

35 Qäsis Belay Mekonnen. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (26 March 2013).

4 Ordering the Anomalous

In the eyes of those who reject them, spirit mediums at Hora Arsadi are upsetting and subversive, in the sense that they represent anomaly and disorder, something incomprehensible to the 'reasoning' mind, in turn justifying their rejection and expulsion from the context of Irreecha. This perspective is shared by the religious institutions discussed above. Although each institution, through its representatives, seems to reject based on its own roots and teachings, the criticisms put forward against mediumship are related in a number of ways. There seem to be shared ideologies that unite all religious groups against mediumship that can be explained by what Harvey Whitehouse calls modes of religiosity. Whitehouse states that humans experience and express religion in two different but not necessarily mutually exclusive ways. He calls these imagistic and doctrinal modes of religiosity. The imagistic mode refers to religious experiences that are emotionally engaging, intense and stimulating. They focus on rituals and have a stronger sense of community. In contrast, the doctrinal mode is routinised, calmer and less focused on stimulating rituals; it is highly dependent on repetition, much more regulated, and entails a more complex theology (Whitehouse 2002). Based on this schema, mediumship falls into the category of the imagistic as it involves a lot of trance and rituals to that effect and also entails a great deal of stimulation, while all the other religious groups tend to be doctrinal. A careful look at the doctrinal mode shows that it is inclined to keep order and that this is the tendency of scriptural religions, which Waqqueeffana is attempting to adopt. Such a dogmatic religiosity in turn dictates the removal of the 'craze' within spirit mediums, which is dubbed unintelligible and convulsive. At the centre of contesting mediumship is a power struggle, as certain religions are entitled to the authority to delineate the 'right' and 'wrong' religious practices based on how they experience and express their religious commitments. The insistence on orderliness of religious practices at Hora Arsadi creates a centre-periphery relationship in which the mediums are marginalised and automatically depicted as the 'other' of Irreecha, although the mediums claim to be one of its defining elements. Given the historical and current power dynamics that tilt in favour of all but the mediums, legitimacy is claimed by the powerful institutions. They become the ones to set standards that become a parameter to marginalise those whose form of ~~experiencing~~ devotion is unacceptable to the hegemon. The Waqqueeffana group is looking for ways to readjust and align the religious tradition in a doctrinal mode that is more routinised, theologically complex and formal, and hence earn legitimacy. This presupposes the removal of the mediumship. The coexistence of ~~these~~

religious traditions is made precarious because mediumship has always been an object of criticism by powerful religious institutions. Therefore, it is clear why the Waqqeeffana groups distance themselves from the mediums, as any association with evil is counterproductive for the Waqqeeffatas, who are trying to define themselves in relation to Christianity and/or Islam. Beyond and related to the religious debate, another point of intersection shared by the religious institutions and, to an extent, state officials and functionaries is that the opposition to mediumship at Hora Arsadi is linked to the wider discourse that represents Irreecha as an authentic cultural artefact which all Oromo regard with respect and pride. The anti-medium advocates claim a moral superiority when they represent mediums as crazy, incomprehensible, backward and superstitious, thereby implying that theirs is a cultured, morally acceptable, forward-looking and sensible way of relating to the deities.

In addition to the above discussion based on modes of religiosity, there is more to the contestation of mediums and mediumship at Hora Arsadi, which is a reflection of the broader historical debate about the place of spirits in the Qallu institution. The recent over-emphasis on the claim that the Oromo are followers of a monotheistic (cf. Dirbi 2011 and Gemetchu 1996) religion has led to the contestation of the Qalliti (female) Qallu (male), the spirit mediums. It is also linked to the nationalist plea to return to the roots of historical Oromo, where before the 16th-century population movement, spirit possession is believed to have had no place. According to Asmerom Leggesse, the Qallu is recognised as a religious authority sanctioned by Waaqa to watch over the Aba Gada; his role is to approve and support. Through his blessings and prayers, the Qallu aids the Aba Gada, who takes office every eight years, and in all this the Qallu is not related to spirit possession. This story resonates also to the role of Qallu, the ritual experts among the contemporary Borana Oromo, who are regarded as the present-day embodiment of the 16th-century Oromo nation. For the Borana Oromo, the Qallu institution is a religious institution that has mythic foundations in which spirit possession has no place (Asmerom 1973, 2000). The Borana “follow their traditional monotheistic religion”, according to Gudrun Dahl (1996: p. 164). Dahl states that even if the Borana recognise the Ayyana (the guardian spirit), they do not link it to possession. The Borana believe that every creature Waaqa made has its own Ayyana. It is pervasive in their lives but without any form of material manifestation, like a spirit possession session (Dahl 1996). Based on this, some scholars assert that Qallu/Qalliti as a spirit medium is a recent phenomenon and, as such, not known to all the Oromo before the 19th century (Lepisa 1975). On the other hand, for the Mecha and Tulema Oromo the benevolent spirit manifests itself by possessing the Qallu/Qalliti (Knutson 1967, H. Lewis 1982, Serawit 2009). There is significant

scholarship that attests to the fact that these sub-branches of the Oromo have been revering the spirits for centuries as part of their commitment to Waaqa and with the belief that the spirits are delegated by him to solve their problems (cf. De Salviac 1901; Bartles 1983; H. Lewis 1982; Meskerem 2000; Erik 1996; Eide 2000; Serawit 2009; Østebø 2011).

Thus, at least the Mecha and Tulema Oromo acknowledge Qallu/Qalliti's association with possession, while the rest might understand Qallu as a senior religious leader who is not possessed by the spirit. Even the Mecha and Tulema, at the first manifestation of the spirits, showed resentment of the ecstatic incidents. Certain Qallu/Qalliti who showed the first signs of possession trance were chased away by some hostile groups. From his observation of this, Knutson states that the hostility "is based on a feeling that the [Qallu/Qalliti] in its present form, especially because of its ecstatic ritual technique, represents a break from what is considered to be the traditional ritual pattern" (Knutson 1967: p. 70). However, he remarks that the hostility expressed by ordinary people was not very serious and did not last long compared to that which came from the Muslims, Orthodox and missionary Christians, who were much more aggressive. Regardless of the fact that it was more recent, mainly after the population movement and incorporation of the Oromo into the Christian empire, spirits were recognised as part of the Mecha and Tulema source of belief. As Knutson points out, spirit possession was and is not in contradiction with the traditional conception of the relationship between man and the supernatural (Knutson 1967). The spirit and the rituals of appeal were perceived as one way through which Waaqa chose to reveal himself to his people (Serawit 2009). As a result, spirit mediums are generally accepted as an integral part of the Mecha and Tulema Oromo religious traditions, and this holds true in the performance of Irreecha, given that the ritual takes place in the heart of Tulema.

Although one could claim that Qallu (as the domain of men) has Borana roots, the institution took different forms in different areas where the Oromo lived and at different times. While benevolent spirits have become an integral part of Tulema and Mecha Oromo religious life, spirits are irrelevant to the Borana. These are some of the internal and external changes that Oromo society has undergone that nationalist discourses, which are wary of heterogeneity, seem not to consider, and the commitment to sanitise Irreecha has led to decontextualisation. In Asmerom Legesse's (1973; 2000) successive work on Borana and what he has to say about the Qallu and Aba Gada, we also get to see the gendered dimension of relationships within the political and religious institutions. He does not mention a female Qalliti, whereas there are countless female ritual experts and spirit mediums in whom Ayyana resides among the Tulema Oromo. For the Tulema, spirit possession is one manifestation of the

spiritual prowess of Qallu/Qalliti, together with the fact that it became open to women mediums as spiritually sanctioned authorities who run their own congregations among the Tulema (Serawit 2015, 2017c).³⁶ However, as will be shown in the below section, the new pan-Oromo discourses on Irreecha seem to compromise the centrality of women just as much as mediumship.

5 Gendered Relations: Women at Irreecha

In the year 1965 the renowned journalist Pawlos Gnogno went to Hora Arsadi to attend to his curiosity, as he puts it, after having heard a lot about the annual ritual. He went with the hope that he would get to see the much talked about spirit that people regard with awe. He describes his observation in the Addis Zāmān newspaper published a few days after his visit. Though taking a rather judgmental tone, Pawlos describes the ritual orders and procedures as he saw them. But above all, what is impressive and in this context useful about the description of the ritual performance is the manner in which he captured women's different engagements and the capacity in which they were engaged. His detailed account sums up the degree to which women were visible in the celebration of Irreecha a few decades ago. He brings out the multilayered role and place each woman has in the context of the ritual performance. It seems that the women were dominant actors, as a result of which he could not help but forget the spirit he intended to meet and instead focus on following the activities of different women who positioned themselves in different places.³⁷

Pawlos started his recollections writing about a woman who was holding a coffee ceremony under the magnificent sacred tree right by the side of the lake. Wrapped in her colourful headscarf, the lady in charge of coffee sat under the tree with decorum. There were about fifteen stoves; on some were coffee pots while the rest were used for roasting coffee beans and meat. People brought various offerings, including locally brewed drinks and hens. Pawlos then walks us towards the lake, where he introduces us to yet another elderly woman who murmured prayers as she dipped the freshly cut grass into the water and sprinkled it on herself. By her side there was a group of women who performed similar activities and departed the place after leaving some butter,

36 Mekuria Bulcha (2011: pp. 254–55) gives credit to Eric Knutson for what he did researching the religions of the Oromo by highlighting the Qallu. While recognising Knutson's work, Mekuria writes about the Qallu by comparing them to priests in the Christian religion not as bearers of the spirit. For him, the Qallu is central to Oromo spirituality not as an embodiment of the benevolent spirit but as a guide and provider of practical services.

37 Pawlos Gnogno. (1958 EC) yäBishoftu Ababora. *Addis Zāmān* 25 Mäskäräm, p. 5.

while others sat on the edge and dipped their legs into the lake. These were women who were prayed for by another woman, who stood and poured holy water on the seated women. There was yet another site where a large number of children were playing while their mothers prayed for them and their husbands ~~said out loud~~, “Please protect my children and my family”. And there was another woman who was shouting, “Please, Aba Bora, make my womb as wide as this lake so I can carry a child”. Another group of women came following a tall handsome man, as Pawlos describes him, who was praying for them. They put butter on his head as a gesture of appreciation.

If we fast-forward and follow the media reportage on Irreecha in the 1990s, one can clearly see the persistent centrality of women in many of the ritual performances. For instance, in a video recorded in 1993, among other things, the journalist is seen approaching women who paused under the sacred tree ~~in awe and reverence~~. Moments later, an Oromiffa-speaking spirit medium and her adherents came closer to the lake. She started reciting prayers in Oromiffa. The journalist followed her to listen to the prayers. She said, “The homeless got homes, the barren gave birth, the lonely got companions. We thank you, Waaqa, for that. Let the year ahead of us be as blissful as the past. Make it a year of peace and stability. If we are not at peace with one another, we shall be dispersed as Mengistu Hailemaryam [president 1974–91] led us astray”. She then sprinkled the holy water on herself and those who followed her.

In these videos, the prayers recited by the women revolved around peace, end of war, and pleading with Waaqa not to put the youth in that dire situation again. Some were praising the time period by saying, “We are grateful, the soldiers came back, our children are safe and let Waaqa keep the frontiers of our country”. Those years were particularly delightful for mothers who had been traumatised by the forced conscription of their children to serve in the military during the civil war. In 1994, we read another account in *Addis Zämän* newspaper which brings out the role of women robustly. The author states that women are the majority and are engaged in different acts, ranging from making coffee to leading prayers.³⁸

Apart from the above accounts recorded by observers, the older generation of Irreecha participants explained that for them, women's visible presence and significant role at Hora Arsadi ~~was~~ the norm. For example, Lemma Guya, a popular painter who was born and raised in Bishoftu city for most of his childhood, remembers the women of his childhood fondly. He used to attend Irreecha as a child, and he has vivid memories of how the ritual was performed in those days. He recounted in our conversation that there was a woman he

38 yäErecha Tewufitawi Gäts'ita. (1987 EC) *Addis Zämän*, 16 T'e'emet, p. 10.



FIGURE 3.1 Portrait of women of Irreecha painted by Lemma Guya
PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR

always saw standing at the edge of the lake. Although, he did not know whether she was a spirit medium or not, he saw her fetching water from the lake and sprinkling it on women and men. He heard her reciting prayers and blessings in Oromiffa. However, he learnt of the woman's death when he went back to Hora Arsadi after many years. He also realised that a lot had changed regarding the role women play in the celebration. In remembrance of his childhood notion of Irreecha, he painted a portrayal of the woman and distributed it as a postcard in the 2008 celebration of Irreecha.³⁹

As a person who also participated in the celebration of Irreecha for a long time, Belay Shiferaw shares the story above. Belay's narrations compliment and bridge the gap Lemma's story left regarding the status of the late woman *was*. It becomes obvious that she was a renowned spirit medium with a large following. She always opened the ritual and blessed the participants. Her major vocation at the celebration of Irreecha was sprinkling holy water from the lake on barren women or those facing various problems. As for the barren women, she dipped the women's breasts in the holy water while reciting prayers for the

39 Lemma Guya. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (27 March 2013).

spirit of Arsadi to give them children. Belay recounts that he has seen women whom she prayed for bringing their children after a year or two to give a testimony of the miracles that resulted from her prayers. They also gave votive offerings to express gratitude.⁴⁰

Another defining strand of stories about the role of women in Irreecha goes back to the very sanction of the lake as sacred. As discussed in the first chapter, the girl who drowned in the lake came out possessed by Arsadi's spirit. The pact between humans and the spirit that resides in the lake materialised through the possession of the girl. Lomi Deme, a spirit medium, asserts that she is a descendant of the girl who first hosted the Arsadi spirit. She maintains that she should be the first to perform the ritual before anyone else owing to her relationship with the spirit that inhabits the lake. At least in the eyes of her followers, there is no legitimate Irreecha until after she goes to the lake and opens the ceremony. Lomi Deme remembers that she was invited a few times when MTA organised only to be left out after a couple of invitations. This obviously limited her role to just a few followers.⁴¹

Pronouncing the centrality of women in the ritual of Irreecha, Meskerem Asseged (2004: p. 73) writes:

The majority of the worshippers are women from the Oromo ethnic group. In fact, all the high priestesses of Erecha have been women. For an untold period of time, these women of Erecha, tucked away on a small hill, in the middle of Ethiopia, have been faithfully and diligently maintaining the balance between their fellow humans and the natural environment. They have been serving as the vehicle to connect the supernatural ayana residing in water, trees, mountains and all elements of nature with their community. They have sacrificed their entire lives for this purpose regardless of what the future holds for them.

Abebe Zegeye also argues that the connection women have with the ritual has made it a site of gendered identity creation and performance. It has also become instrumental in enhancing women's understanding of the world and a means of creating a harmonious relationship with nature and the surrounding environment (Abebe 2004). Scholars like Martha (2009) also argue that the role of women and their participation in collective ritual is significant in the way it reaffirms the Oromo identity and preserves their collective memory as a nation. Jeylan strengthens these observations, saying that "women are

40 Belay Shiferaw. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (20 November 2013).

41 Lomi Deme. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (5 October 2013).

intermediary figures between Waaq that represents nature and the physical world or humans. Myth has it that Waaq listens to women's desire and instantly responds to it. This is a part of the belief system that women are closer to nature in their nurturing and life-sustaining activities" (2004: p. 111).

Based on these stories, at least for as long as one believes in the presence of spirits at Hora Arsadi, women are stakeholders and their relevance is not disputed.⁴² Despite this, in the more recent celebration of Irreecha the minor or almost non-existent role of women forces one to pose certain sets of questions. In the official celebration, where are the women? What do they do? In what capacity do they participate? As mentioned in the first chapter, the new patrons of Irreecha (MTA and RSCTB) introduced some sense of 'order' in the way participants are arranged while walking to the lake. This change came with the redefinition of the place of women as part of the celebration. The arrangement puts the women in leadership positions during the walk to the lake. However, their role ends there. They sing and lead the procession to the lake, and upon arrival they are exempted from the prayers, the speech and other activities. Irreecha suddenly becomes a masculine public space where men take over the ritual in every sense. With this the role of women shifts from active and vocal agents to inactive onlookers with the minutest of roles. In the words of Beka:

Men took it away, they took away Irreecha. They snatched it from the women. This was not my experience with Irreecha during both the imperial and Därg regimes. My childhood memory of the celebration cannot be imagined without women. It looked like it was all about them. Women were the steeple of Irreecha. After the men hijacked it, now the women became secondary. The organisers dress the women up in colourful clothes, they make them sing and clap.⁴³

The ritual became a manifestation of asymmetrical relations between men and women. If anything, women appear as patronised subjects, as witnessed in the celebration of 2008, where the male master of ceremonies gave an extensive speech about how Oromo men should behave in relation to their wives, daughters and other women. In this speech he emphatically requested that the men respect women. Not to be drunk and disturb them at home, not to rape and abduct girls but rather to send them to school. In this way, they are represented as persons who need men's attention and respect but not as active agents who play roles. They are not given the space to take active part,

⁴² Tilahun Zemedkun. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (6 October 2013).

⁴³ Beka Nemera. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (18 March 2018).

other than just being talked about by the master of ceremonies. This transformed their role from active ritual performers to victims of men's misconduct who need the elders' intervention to rescue them. The landmark event that led to the removal of women from the centre stage was the restructuring of the organisation by MTA. The return of Tadesse Muleta as the ~~legitimate~~ Aba Malka has also contributed to the removal of women from their place in leading prayers. This coincided with MTA's act of distancing itself from and disparaging the mediums and mediumistic practice, in which women are central. Homogenised Oromo visions of nationhood depict mediums as un-Irreecha and by extension un-Oromo, and it goes without saying that this removes certain actors, like women, for whom the practice matters.

Their recent marginalisation becomes even more intriguing when one considers the general assumption that associates women ~~together~~ with other subordinated groups like slaves, with mediumship (cf. Lewis 2003). Mediumship is an undesired part of Irreecha, and if women are actively participating in it, then there is little room for them in Irreecha, which has been converted to men's domain. The predominantly male group of organisers are keeping women and spirit mediums to the side while privileging men and thereby patriarchising Irreecha. This is particularly noticeable in the way mediums, women and ethnic diversity were dealt with in various media outlets. In recent transmissions, live or otherwise, there was not a single medium interviewed. Rather, there is a shift from 'asking them' to 'asking about them' and gathering dismissive answers. They became objects of open criticism by the journalists and the people journalists chose to ask. Journalists are seen keeping a fair physical distance and pointing their fingers at the mediums to ask other participants questions like, "Who are those? What are they doing? Is what they are doing part of the Oromo religion?" All of those asked answer that it is not part of the Oromo religion and the mediums have to be removed. Some even boldly state that mediums and those who follow them to Hora Arsadi must be chased.⁴⁴ The rituals performed by the mediums under the tree were represented as 'inappropriate'. The custodians of the lake also share this opinion that the new way of organising Irreecha and everything the TV shows has pushed women aside, disregarding their centrality in the past.

The gradual politicisation of the ritual and the ensuing removal of women challenges the notion that the Oromo socio-political tradition is accommodative of women and that they share the right to actively participate in common

44 I was told by some people at Hora Arsadi that on the day of the celebration, a group of young men have come under the sacred tree where people were making coffee and broken their coffee pot and cups.

celebrations. Even the religiously sanctioned women are removed from the official procession in the name of cleansing the ritual of spirit mediums. The example of Lomi Deme, the medium who was initially invited to Hora Arsadi by MTA but later forgotten, is already illuminating. Just as they are absent in the discourses of Oromo nationalism, women feature in the Irreecha celebration as absent subjects but present as aesthetic objects. They make Irreecha more colourful with their songs, their feminine beauty, their attire and their symbolic siqqee stick.

And yet, women reclaim their spaces where they 'disturb' the order. The trance and the freedom it brings detach women from the passivising position assigned to them by the ritual organisers, thereby undoing the idea of a decorated woman representing the nation ceremonially. They reclaim their position as the steeple of Irreecha when they commence under the sacred tree and perform various activities ranging from making coffee to trance and prayers. To be a steeple, as recollected in the interviews, archives, videos and my own personal observations, is to be central in the ritual performance and everything it entails. In the current mode of the celebration, women find that by resorting to the tree, which in turn serves as a site of freedom from the hustle and bustle of the everyday as well as the expectations that they should conduct themselves in a certain way as imposed by the organisers. Thus, to reduce women and their presence at Hora Arsadi and generally in the nationalist discourse and practices to passive victims does not fully account for their agency. Women carve their own niche even within the male-dominated space of Hora Arsadi, where they create alternative spaces in which they are actively performing rituals of social, economic and political significance.

The women who walk in front of the men during the procession join the mediumship under the tree to take part in the ceremony. The spirit mediums' space and time is thus gendered. It is a gendered space where they actively play roles, and assert themselves both as mediums and adherents. At this point, they are less constrained by the formalities and orders. They also play roles of leadership by reciting prayers for the adherents under the tree. Those having difficulties with health or other complications look to them for prayers.⁴⁵ This tallies with Martha's (2009: p. 98) observation of Oromo women in exile reminding us that although women are caught between the marginalising male

45 Additionally, women mediums like Lomi Deme prefer to go to a separate area where the influence of the minimalists and maximalists is less felt. Until the land was given to an investor, she used to perform the ritual with her followers on the western side of the lake. This is indicative of the subversive stance some women take against the imposed official time and space of celebration.



FIGURE 3.2 Women celebrants under the sacred tree
PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR

dominated nationalist agenda and the struggle to reclaim spaces within it, they are not simply victimised but are actively engaged in the processes of transforming the nation-state. In her study of the fertility ritual known as Attete as performed by women who live in the diaspora, Martha asserts that “women perform embodied spirituality to reterritorialize and to soothe the wounds of the nation” (2009: p. 90). Moreover, she credits the women’s involvement in such rituals as part of reviving Oromo spirituality which has been silenced for centuries. In her analysis, Martha also calls attention to the ambivalent position women assume in the nationalist project, where they are both marginalised and yet central to the transformation of the patriarchal nation-state. Irreecha is an empirical example, capturing the ambivalence of women’s marginality and centrality in Oromo nationalist discourses and practices. In his discussion of women and Oromo nationalism, John Sorenson (1996: p. 459) stipulates that generally “nationalist discourses construct an image of an undivided community and seek to disregard internal differences, regarding these as divisive for the struggle against external enemies. Gender emerges as one of the key differences and paradoxical issues of nationalism.” He then states that the Oromo nationalist project excludes women from the struggle for freedom and independence as if theirs is not a significant part of the struggle and not political enough (Sorenson 1996). This sentiment is shared by Gow (2001), who

opines that no matter what kind of role women play in the nationalist struggle, they are presented as an embodiment of the nation which men have to protect, fight for, a representation not cognisant of their political subjectivity. This is reflected in a piece written by Gurmesa Geda and distributed on the day of the 2002 celebration.

Gurmesa contributed his article to the *Waaqeefanna* magazine that was distributed during the celebration of *Irreecha* in 2002. The title of his article, which was written in Amharic, translates to 'Gender and our Culture,' and in the article he expresses reservations about the current 'uproar' about gender equality as a western import that does not sit well with the Oromo understanding of where the woman's place is. He writes that *Waaqeefanna*, which follows natural law, has a vision of protecting women's rights that differs from that of its western counterparts. The religion that is committed to implementing the law of nature does not drive its vision from intangible propaganda but from the unchangeable law of nature and the culture of the Oromo society. *Waaqeefanna* condemns any injustice against women and abhors rape and any other form of crime that capitalises on women's nature. It also plays a part in fighting against all of this. The problem with *Waaqeefanna* is the question of how to fight. What kind of tactic and strategy should we follow to alleviate these problems? In asking this question, Gurmesa rejects what he regards as a version of imported western feminism, which has had negative consequences on the Oromo social fabric. He asserts that western feminism does not speak to the Oromo reality, and it is making women militant and selfish by way of which they are becoming a threat to the social order. He argues that it is basically spoiling gender relations because it is against the law of nature to which the Oromo are strictly committed and based on which their lives are organised. He further remarks that it is high time that society takes action to stop this threat western feminism is posing to gender relations among the Oromo. One of the things the author finds disconcerting is that womanhood as living for others' happiness or paying sacrifice for the sake of others' wellbeing is compromised.⁴⁶ Unless the ideal order is restored, where women are respected but also accept their role as mothers and sisters and the burden it comes with, the Oromo society is endangered as women are becoming more self-centred by the day. The right form of gender equality is not that which artificially imposes equality but that which acknowledges that gender relations are beyond human comprehension. But still one thing is clear to the author, that there is one gender (it is already implied that this is the female) that has to compromise for

46 Gurmesa Gada. (2002) *ts'otana bahelachin. Waaqeeffanna*. Fulbaana, 29, pp. 60–61.

the wellbeing and flourishing of the ideal Oromo society.⁴⁷ These were discourses propagated by the magazine that was sponsored by the MTA, a patron association to Irreecha and one that is devoted to the nationalist cause. And it is not an accident that women gradually left the scene of Irreecha as the active agents they were historically. The above discussion is more relevant because it reveals the propaganda on gender relations that has been distributed to Irreecha participants in these publications.

Regardless of the claim that the Gada is democratic and that generally women are accommodated in the socio-political structure of the Oromo, the recent trends and practices do not seem to support these claims. Since in the Oromo Gada system politics is almost exclusively the domain of the Oromo men, women are not entertained in it (Asmerom 1973). Men are in control of virtually everything outside the house in the Borana society, which is now regarded as the only remaining example of originality. Men are, according to Asmerom, in control of “military and political activities. Only men can engage in warfare. Only men take part in the elections of leaders of camps or of age-sets and gada classes. Men lead and participate in ritual activities [...]. Women are actively excluded from age-sets. They are therefore heavily dependent on men for most political-ritual services and for all activities” (1973 pp. 19–20). He continues, they must also “make decisions concerning rituals and all the economic activities associated with the performance of rites. They discuss the place and time of rituals, what food supplies are needed for the sustenance of celebrants, what animals are needed for sacrifice, who should contribute the livestock, and how they should perform the numerous steps of the rite” (Asmerom 1973: p. 21). If Irreecha is a manifestation of a national identity that appeals to a return to some kind of root like restoring Gada, then there is a great compromise being made on the issue of gender relations. It creates and/or ~~re-~~produces already existing forms of power relations that subordinate women or remove them from active roles in the ritual celebration. The Oromo nationalists’ insistence on return to Gada as an idealised democratic institution is uncritical in such a way that it romanticises the institution as democratic and needing to be restored as a system of administration. This institution, however, excludes women. And so long as the nationalist discourse insists on returning to Gada and continues to be uncritical of the institution, both the discursive and symbolic as well as practical exercises of nationalism remain insensitive to the women’s struggles and continue to privilege Oromo nationalism with its masculinist undertones. Therefore, while looking into Gada as an alternative source for democratic ideals as well as a system of rule, we cannot afford to

47 Gurmesa Gada. (2002) ts’otana bahelachin. *Waaqeffanna*. Fulbaana, 29, pp. 60–61.

be uncritical of it as a system of governance, at least for its discrepancies on gender issues.

6 Where Does the State Stand in All This?

Marginalising mediums and disparaging their practices even in the face of constitutional provisions for freedom of association and freedom of worship seem to be a continuous thread in the actions of successive regimes in Ethiopia. The regional state as an apparatus of power has involved itself in the production of new realities regarding the position of mediums in the celebration of Irreecha. Its attempt to reframe Irreecha as a ritual detached from the spirit mediums is part of the process of exerting control on the participants based on a singular and normative version of what Irreecha should be like. This is part of managing the ritual using formalisation that dictates the downgrading of mediumship as something that is disfiguring the whole ceremony. The state collaborates with other institutions and associations to legalise some acts and proscribe others. The regional state's zeal to remove mediumship is part of the strategy of establishing Irreecha as an icon of national identity celebration that symbolises Oromo unity. In the process of rearticulating Irreecha as a symbol of Oromo unity however, there is exclusion in the name of inclusion. Making Irreecha an all-inclusive (as far as one is an Oromo) ritual ironically involves the exclusion of mediumship and its practitioners. While inclusivity is an approach that targets a larger population, it is undertaken at the expense of the mediums who are yet to raise their voices against their erasure in the **same** act of creating unity. Notwithstanding the fact that both the spirit mediums and other religious groups are entitled to exercise their religious freedom as enshrined in the constitution, practice seems to have favoured other groups. According to the spirit mediums, the Evangelicals who were marginalised in the past are better off now compared to the traditional religious practitioners, because many are in positions of state authority to make decisions.⁴⁸ In this regard, the declared religious freedom does not meet the mediums' expectations of freedom to exercise their religion, as was the pledge at the outset. It has rather added more challenges that hamper their freedom. This makes mediums an example of the discrepancy of the provisions stated on paper and the implementation. Some mediums describe the current state as a 'P'énté state' because just as P'éntés do, it rejects them while it presents itself as defender of the rights of

⁴⁸ Mesfin Abebe. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (23 March 2013).

minorities.⁴⁹ Why does the state reject them on the official day of the celebration of Irreecha? To understand the ambivalent relationship the state has with the mediums and mediumship at Hora Arsadi, in particular, one needs to tease out how the state as a rational body operates and how it relates to what seem to be 'irrational' acts by mediums. According to the Weberian model, the state is an entity whose rationality is founded on the removal of the spiritual and giving way to 'reason'. By this logic, mediumship, on the other hand, is a source of 'irrational' power emanating from the 'invisible'. For a rational institution, endorsing such an irrational act is not viable for the regime. It would come at the cost of being discredited by participants who would criticise the government for associating itself with 'irrationality'. One could summarise this as a conflict of two forms of power, of the 'rational' and the 'irrational' or the 'visible' and 'invisible'. Mediumship is an invasion of the rationality of the state and it goes against the logic of the state; because of this, the two do not seem to coexist at the celebration of the ritual. Since their coexistence is untenable, one has to remove the other, and given the power bestowed on the organisers, it is easier to remove mediumship. Thus, the contestation of mediumship by the regional state can be understood as a manifestation of the tension between the government's understanding of Irreecha, which involves 'secularising' the existing practices, with that of mediums.

Moreover, to support a public act of mediumship in the name of exercising religious freedom as it goes under the tree runs the risk of allowing it to degenerate into something uncontrollable. It is volatile. For instance, what if one of the participants who might go into a trance takes the liberty to criticise the government? Worse still, a trance session is a cacophony that could easily be manipulated. One of the opponents could pretend to be in a trance state and use the opportunity to raise some points that could not have been raised otherwise. The person cannot be held accountable for what she/he utters in a state of 'unconsciousness'. As a result, one can get away with saying what they are not able to say under normal circumstances. Moreover, as Samuli Schielke asserts, "the citizen's state of mind is not a private matter, nor is it a secret between the believer and God. It is, rather taken to be key to the nation's development" (2012: p. 99). This takes trance, particularly in public celebrations like Irreecha, out of the private domain and into one in which the state and other powerful actors want to discipline in the interest of the 'comfort' of others. As far as the state is concerned, trance is a problem that needs fixing, either by removing it from Hora Arsadi or ordering the event by forbidding

49 Debebe Kasse. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (23 November 2013).

the rituals associated with it. And yet, trance is perhaps the soul of Irreecha, a deep-seated metaphysical phenomena that cannot be co-opted or removed as easily as one might assume.

7 Recentring-Decentering: a Tale of Two Associations

Mediums, at least in the official discourse, are deprived of cohabiting the same space with other celebrants because they are regarded as errant. This organised contestation against them has generated a spirit of resistance among the mediums. As a manifestation of resistance, some spirit mediums remain in their local areas or prefer to come the week after.⁵⁰ For instance, a renowned spirit medium from Addis Ababa stopped going to the Irreecha celebration of Hora Arsadi in 2013, and a significant number of his followers stayed with him.⁵¹ Tadesse Muleta, the Aba Malka who came back from exile, has decided to celebrate Irreecha with his followers at the sacred tree in front of his residence. His Irreecha goes on simultaneously with the Irreecha that goes on at Hora Arsadi, and according to him, quite a large number of participants attend the ritual at his doorstep. He refuses to go to Hora Arsadi because he believes that it has been converted to a place of promoting political interests and this has corrupted the spiritual aspect. This is on top of the orchestrated harassment directed against mediums and the things they do. He has decided to remain in his village with his Ulfa.⁵²

Apart from individual efforts and protests like the ones described above, until recently there has never been any association or even an informal network of mediums that was recognised by the state. In truth, spirit mediums are diverse and dispersed in different parts of the country, including the regional state of Oromia. The first association of mediums known as the 'Ethiopian Oromo Gada Waqqeeffana Ayyana Protection and Care Development Association' was established on 2 July, 2010.⁵³ The head office is

50 Kuma Idea. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (20 November 2013).

51 Caalaa Sori. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (27 November 2013).

52 Tadesse Muleta. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (20 November 2013). For more on Ulfa, see also Serawit (2017).

53 The formation of this association came in response to what happened in 2009 following the arrest one of the famous spirit mediums called Tamrat Geleta, also an Oromo ethnic. His arrest was followed by a lot of criticism, particularly disseminated in print media and broadcast on state owned media outlets run by ERTA. According to the board members of the association, this association was conceived as a way of protecting spirit mediums' interest and also making sure other people do not commit scandalous acts in the name

located in Addis Ababa. This association's main mission is to publicise the belief in Waaqa and the spirits Waaqa gave to mediate in various platforms. The members are not exclusively Oromo as Ayyantus from other ethnic groups are also included. With respect to their religious affiliation, members subscribe to either Orthodox Christianity or Islam, and of course some are Waqqeefatas. Regarding their relations with the Gada Tulema council, the Gada office does not recognise them as an Oromo Ayyantu association due partly to their membership, which is all-inclusive (both ethnic and religious).⁵⁴ The members are committed to creating a counter-discourse that glorifies the belief and asserts that it is the homegrown indigenous religious tradition before the introduction of the institutional religions that finally displaced it from its stronghold. In addition, members are committed to challenging the embedded stereotype that depicts them as worshippers of the Devil. In this line, the chairperson of the association, Mengistu Geresu, states, "We want to teach people that we are not worshipping trees or rivers. These are derogatory expressions having a long established history ~~to insult the practice~~. We are teaching that our belief is not less than any other religion and we want to develop this belief." He further states that both Ayyantus and their followers feel ashamed because they grew up hearing that they are inherently evil. Nevertheless, according to the chairperson, times have now changed. Humiliation and abuse because of their religious convictions have become outdated since the declaration of religious freedom. As far as they are concerned, mediumship should no longer be a symbol of fear and shame.⁵⁵

The association is against the banning and the assault on mediumship at Hora Arsadi. It clearly states that it is not right to stop the practice, even if one looks at it from a legal point of view. The action by the Aba Gadas and a few officials goes against the constitutional provision as it violates the right of others to freely exercise their beliefs. Moreover, it is not valid to request a group of religious practitioners to stop what is beyond their control. One of the board members of the association states that spirit possession and the associated trance is not something one can manipulate, nor is it something one gets through education. It is acceptable if a spirit or spirits come and possess mediums when Irreecha is held since one cannot limit Ayyana in time and space. It can come anytime, anywhere, and that is what makes the banning

of mediums (Focus Group Discussion with board members of Ayyantu development and protection association. Addis Ababa, January 18, 2013).

54 Caalaa Sori. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (23 February 2013).

55 Mengistu Geresu. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (18 January 2013).

problematic. Just because Irreecha is an annual celebration for all Oromo, it is not possible to stop the spirits from possessing their mediums.⁵⁶

The association recognises that the power balance tilted in favour of Christianity in the past had enabled the Church to create negative discourses that influenced others to look down upon the mediums. To reverse this, it is making an effort to create awareness so that people do not fear to practice their beliefs freely. This association can be framed after Nancy Fraser (1990) as 'sub-altern counter public,' serving as a discursive space for the subordinated where they "invent and circulate counter discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (1990: p. 67). Using such alternatives, they minimise the disadvantage of not being able to speak in the official sphere to which they have no access.⁵⁷

In rejection of the 'Ethiopian Oromo Gada Waqqeeffana Ayyana Protection and Care Development Association', in 2013 the Tulema Gada Council with the support of a consultant from the Bishoftu's culture and tourism office started an initiative to organise Ayyantus who are 'pure' Oromo and who subscribe to the anti-mediumship and other regulations as regards the role of mediums at Hora Arsadi. One of the main regulations required that participants refrain from any spirit related activities at Hora Arsadi, be it on the main day of the celebration or on ordinary days. In addition to members' non-involvement, they must be ready to defend the true Oromo religion by telling their adherents not to do any ritual in the name of appeasing the spirit at Hora Arsadi.⁵⁸

This approach is taken as a gradual process of sieving the 'corrupted practices' out. Caalaa says that the group is not taking measures right away against mediumship at Hora Arsadi. He states, "We first strengthen ourselves and pass strict laws. The association has to be stronger. We are attempting to encourage

56 Focus Group Discussion with board members of Ethiopian Oromo Gada Waqqeeffana Ayyana Protection and Care Development Association. Conducted by: Serawit B. Debele. (18 January 2013).

57 Moreover, as a strategy of reaction to the historical and contemporary challenges, members are trying to create good relations with the state through their engagements in the social, political and economic affairs of the country. They work in close collaboration with the state. In this case, they concur with the state's development policies and they are supporting many development initiatives. This is in addition to the tax they pay as a registered association.

58 Caalaa Sori. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (27 November 2013). It was made clear to me in interviews with the Aba Gadas that they are not against the spirit mediums or their rituals. They are mainly against mediumship as it happens at Hora Arsadi. They have realised that rejecting the spirits while working with the mediums is not viable. They prefer to control the behaviour of the mediums and the manifestation of the spirits by confining them in time and space.

the members to speak up against those people at the lake. There are 280 members and we set up a committee which is headed by the *Aba Muda* to take care of the sieving. We have conducted a number of meetings with the *Ayyantus* so far.”⁵⁹ The rationale for organising the mediums under one umbrella is to get the consent of the Oromo who are the majority and make it easier to tell others to stop what they are doing. This is done in the name of protecting the Oromo religion and culture from deformation. The intention in bringing the Oromo mediums together is to create a division amongst the spirit mediums along ethnic lines. Although they are working hard to achieve this, *Aba Gada Bayyana* states that it is not an easy task to cleanse *Irreecha* of the ‘undesirable’ practices. According to him, it requires a great deal of time, energy and effort from their side.⁶⁰

By creating officially approved and rejected categories of mediums, the regional state and the *Tulema* office are managing mediumship to make the process of sanitising *Irreecha* faster and easier. Organising them under one association also creates a loophole, which the officials and leaders of the *Tulema Gada* office can easily manipulate to justify their act against mediumship at *Hora Arsadi*. It gives them the ability to say that there is an association of mediums opposing the actions of some at *Hora Arsadi*, and those who refuse to follow the association’s footsteps are illegitimate. Connecting mediumship with the approval/disapproval of the newly formed association entitles the association with the authority to tell other mediums not to perform certain rituals.⁶¹ The main challenge is that there is a problem in bringing all Oromo *Ayyantus* under one association supervised by the *Aba Gada* office. The process is not as smooth as they envisaged because there is a division within the *Ayyantus* themselves regarding the ban of spirit mediums at *Hora Arsadi*. Members who assert that it is not possible to stop the spirit have resisted the prohibition. One of the senior Oromo *Ayyantus* has defected from the association, taking the position that the prohibition is neither proper nor legal. The ethnic card that is played to achieve an end that glorifies one ethnic group by projecting undesirable features on others is not accepted by all Oromo mediums. The attempt by the *Tulema Gada* office to divide the mediums along ethnic lines is geared towards destabilising the unity of the mediums and halting the potential challenge they pose if they remain united. However, because mediums are joined by spiritual desires rather than ethnic urges, an attempt to divide them along ethnic lines is counterproductive as they share with others spiritual

59 Caalaa Sori. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (27 November 2013).

60 Caalaa Sori. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (27 November 2013).

61 *Aba Gada Bayyana Sanbato*. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (27 November 2013).

capital, which is crucial to their lives. This makes the task of organising all Oromo Ayyantus under one umbrella while sidelining others futile.

In close alliance with the regional state, the Gada Tulema office takes action to discourage the mediums, and the Waqqeeffana association and its advocates provide the guidelines for the official action of sieving out mediumship. For instance, an official from the city tourism office states that they are working in collaboration to eradicate spirit related rituals and restore the correct form of Irreecha. In his own words:

We go to Hora Arsadi on Sundays to teach them. We started this in 2003 Ethiopian Calendar together with the Aba Muda, who is part of the Ayyantus, and we have started telling people that it is not appropriate to perform all the rituals to revere the spirit and also to go into trance at the Malka. The Aba Gada and the Aba Malka go with us and tell them that the proper Oromo Qallus do not do this and this is not part of the Oromo religious tradition because of which they have to stop it.⁶²

~~The introduction of 'aesthetic deformation' into the vocabulary of the organisation of Irreecha was instrumental in justifying the removal of the 'undesirable' despite that it has not always been successful as the stories below reveal.~~
 One day, the officials and the traditional community leaders were questioned by the mediums and those who revere them for violating the constitutionally granted religious freedom.

8 Spirit Intervention: Resistance

One Sunday morning, some officials from the Bishoftu tourism and culture office went to Hora Arsadi while the mediums and their followers were holding a coffee ceremony. Their intention was to advocate for the termination of activities on ordinary days. Since there were some assertive mediums and participants present on that day, the exchange took on a confrontational dimension as mediums began to challenge the delegates, avowing that it is their democratic right to worship at the site whenever they want to. While this argument was going on possession sessions started and this changed the scene of the Hora Arsadi leaving the officials overwhelmed by what they witnessed. One of the mediums who had gotten involved in the debate said, "You see? The spirit is here, go and stop it. Then we can agree that it is possible to stop this thing

62 Caalaa Sori. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (27 November 2013).

and we will stop coming here as you tell us.” And another medium continued, “I want to live a life free from the spirit, to lead a non-Ayyantu life, but I cannot do that. The spirit is not like clothes that I can take off and throw away. It is not like dirt that I can wash away. I have been chosen to serve.”⁶³ This became a turning point in the action the officials were taking to stop the mediums, as there was no way for them to prove that they could stop the spirit. This was regarded as a miraculous intervention by the spirits to show that they are unstoppable and mighty.

Below are examples of couplets recited at Hora Arsadi during the time of Hadra mäsab to call for the intervention of the spirits.

Aba mäla, aba säbäba	He the insightful problem solver
Kätäf yelal gera sigäba	Comes to deliver us from confusion
Agazina kindé antä ateläyän	You our support and strength stay with us
Yäarsädiw anbäsa antä ateläyän	Lion of Arsadi do not forsake us please
Wädihem wädeyam beyé lemäläs wädantä	I look upon you after wondering in vain
Säw aychelemina yalämädanitu	For man cannot do a thing alone ⁶⁵

Mediums and adherents alike communicate to the spirits that they are helpless without the spirits’ intervention. They continuously invoke their presence using songs. In the first verse they state their confidence in the arrival of the mighty spirit whenever the crowd is anxious and in need of deliverance. In the second verse they plead with the Arsadi spirit to be there with them as it is the source of their strength. In the third couplet, they appeal to the spirit, telling it that they are ultimately seeking its presence for they are not capable of doing anything without the support it extends.

Through the spirits’ manifestation of themselves, the mediums and their adherents retrieve power with which they bargain while dealing with confrontations. The spirits perform, on behalf of their mediums and adherents, the role of power restorer. I borrow ‘resistance’ from El Maarouf to capture the moment when spirits intervene in defence of their hosts, their adherents and their turf, which is the lakeside. Resistance, as defined by El Maarouf, is a form of resistance that is supervised from above.⁶⁵ The transcendent force that makes resistance at Hora Arsadi possible is the spirit that appears in time

63 Abaynesh Zegeye. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (17 November 2013).

64 Field notes from Bishoftu, November 17, 2013.

65 El Maarouf (2011: 43–45) develops this concept to analyse resistance as performed in the context of music festivals in Morocco.

of need. In the face of multidirectional opposition, efforts by sober individuals are not all that can be counted on. Spirits are also involved in rescuing and protecting their interests. In the face of persistent repression and marginalisation, the enactment of the spirits bails the mediums out. The mediums and adherents reclaim 'insubordinate power' by being agents of the possessing spirit or spirits (McCully 1994: p. 95). In the incident described above, for instance, the appearance of this 'insubordinate power' is one of the reasons that the officers were forced to take a different action that morning instead of continuing the persecution.

Resistance continues on the day of the celebration as well, when they gather under the sacred tree. The fire is lit to make coffee and burn incense, and this aroma, the beverages poured under the tree, the chanting of people who are in a trance and the singing, as well as prayers recited by some mediums, are the overwhelming features there. ~~Women and men pay respect to the tree and the stone by kneeling in front of both.~~ Mediums and their followers share the sacred tree. However, the scenario of sharing is limited to the physical place because there are multiple spaces and times emerging within the circle itself. For instance, in moments of trance possession, the possessed are no longer in the circle except physically. As has been pointed out by I.M. Lewis (2003: p. xix), "Possessing spirits may take their human hosts (in one form or another) on exciting spirit trips to the heavens as well as elsewhere". They have hence crossed the boundaries of present time and the Hora Arsadi location into trance space. Trance space is an element of space that arises from possession and the resultant transcendence of time and space. It is beyond human consciousness but belongs to, just like Mittermaier's dream spaces, "an actual realm located between spirit and matter, between being and not being, between the Divine and the human" (Mittermaier 2008: p. 51). It is an active part of the many layers of spaces that impinge on and are shaped by the real place and human experiences.

If we go back to the postcard Lemma made in remembrance of the woman he grew up watching while she conducted certain rituals, we are reminded of the act of returning to the past to look for solace. It also reminds us of Fanon's opinion of the role of the artist in relation to invoking the past, where he writes, "An artist who has decided to illustrate the truths of the nation turns paradoxically towards the cast and away from actual events. What he ultimately intends to embrace are in fact the cast-offs of thought, its shells and corpses" (1967: p. 42). What we observe in Lemma's action is precisely an attempt to redeem the cast-off thoughts, the figure of the woman who graciously carries the spirit(s). These have become cast-offs, rejected by the nationalist discourse, which at the same time looks back to the past, but a distant past ~~with which people~~

~~have no relationship or a past~~ that does not necessarily reflect their truths. So, the attempt to urge the Oromo to return to authenticity through the prism of Irreecha dismisses specificities that developed in different localities across time. Also, this becomes problematic: Oromo nationalists are up against historical subordination and in their attempt to fight that, unless they take heed of specificities and histories within the larger nationalist framework, there is a risk of reproducing the same oppressive regime they set out to fight. This chapter is a voice of resistance ~~to~~ taking certain perspectives for granted while overlooking others. As Susan Reed warns us, without neglecting the perspective of the elites on certain issues, we also have to account for the experiences of those who are 'subalternised' by hegemonic discourses and practices. If left unchallenged, elite perspectives may "have the power to become facts in ways that can be misleading, devaluing, even erasing the experiences and contributions of the non-elite communities. The voices, the agency, and stories of subaltern performances are often completely absent from national [...] histories" (2010: p. 14). Looking at the way Irreecha is narrated, it is evident that there is a danger that this might already be the case.

The Making of the State

This chapter explores the state in relation to Irreecha, focusing on how the EPRDF government relates with the ritual and its participants. By exploring co-optation of the physical space, analysing speeches, billboards, media representations and the administration of violence, I argue that the state has always been interested in managing the ritual in order to exert a great deal of control. My usage of the state draws on its conception by Pierre Bourdieu (1994: pp. 3–4) as “the cumulation of a process of concentration of different species of capital” to argue that Irreecha is instrumentalised as a site at which “a particular vision of the state” is intimated to the subjects. The manner in which state presence manifests itself, however, is characterised by ambivalence. There is no singular articulation of what Irreecha means for the state, particularly in relation to political processes unfolding in the country. What makes this ambivalence even more intriguing is the fact that in its attempt to affirm itself, the state also creates conditions for its own unmaking. Although in this chapter there is a detour to the imperial (1931–74) and military (1974–91) regimes to show the changes and continuities, there is more emphasis on post-1991 developments.

1 Sacred, Tourist Attraction and Available for Investment

While historically the Ethiopian Orthodox Church took over sacred spaces of indigenous religions, Hora Arsadi appears to be a site shared between the state and ritual participants. The state physically instituted itself at Hora Arsadi when Emperor Haile Selassie built the Fairfield Palace after he returned from exile in 1941.¹ This action was a first step that marked the materialisation of attention paid to the vicinity of Hora Arsadi. The building of the palace was followed by the construction of Ras Hotel and other residences for the aristocrats. The emperor also ordered ~~that the~~ Agricultural Research Institute ~~be built~~ on a spot known as Birbirsä Foqa. Before the building of the institute, Birbirsä Foqa was the spot at which participants gathered to slaughter sacrificial animals. According to long-time participants, until the coming of

1 Fairfield palace was so named after the place at which the emperor stayed while in exile in the UK (1935–41). Because it is an army hospital, I was denied permission by the security guards to enter the compound to do more archival research.

the institute at Birbirsä Foqa, there were two interconnected phases of ritual performances. The first phase was what took place by the lakeside. The crowd would go to the lake to dip grass in the holy water and perform other rituals of supplication. The second phase continued at Birbirsä Foqa, where animals were slaughtered and traditional songs were sung by different groups of people from different ethnic backgrounds.² However, the successive construction in the 1940s and 1950s led to the confiscation of part of the plot on which the people were performing Irreecha rituals. This resulted in the shrinking of the boundaries of Hora Arsadi, which in turn meant the confinement of Irreecha to the lakeshore. The two phases of the celebration merged to one having a spatial alteration.

The official discourse on these constructions was associated with the town's geographical setting, which has to do with the beautiful weather and the landscape. But, the elderly who participated in Irreecha during the reign of Haile Selassie argue that the emperor decided to build his palace by Hora Arsadi because he was told to do so by his personal advisors.³ Whether for recreational purposes or due to the spiritual value attached to the site, the emperor paid frequent visits to Hora Arsadi, which made building the palace a natural step. When the Därg came to power in 1974, Fairfield Palace was nationalised and converted to a hospital for the army. Some of the residences of the aristocrats were given to high-ranking army officials, and the hotel was put under government ownership. The place of the religious celebration fell once again within the premises of the national security forces. This in turn had its own bearing on the time of the celebration, because of fear instigated by military scrutiny. Many people went early in the morning to perform the ritual and leave the area before anyone saw them, while others stayed on to continue enjoying the festivities. In addition to the spatial alteration the land confiscation injected, here again we witness the temporal shift.

Hora Arsadi was regarded as a recreational site by some people who lived in Addis Ababa, as captured by Ayele Kidane's piece in *Addis Zāmān* newspaper. The article titled 'Yädäberäzäitu Bäal Tākäbärä' states that Debrezeit (Bishoftu) is a town that hosts a large number of people every Sunday as a centre of recreation. He continues, "however, yesterday [21 Mäskäräm] was special because people travelled to the town to participate in the Irreecha festivity". The writer describes Hora Arsadi as 'yāCh'āwata Sefera' (a playground).⁴ After the revolution in 1974, the new regime continued to promote the area as the recreational

² For more on this see Caalaa (2013).

³ Kebede Tikse. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (16 March 2013).

⁴ Ayele Kidane. (1957 EC) Yädäberäzäitu Bäal Tākäbärä. *Addis Zāmān*, 22 Mäskäräm, p. 2.

centre everyone had to visit, as we read in the report in *Addis Zāmān* below. Deneke Berhanu writes an extended article titled 'Hora yāTurisem Mäseheb' published on 16 T'e'q'emet 1975 EC. He begins by praising Ethiopia as a country endowed with wonderful natural attractions and then narrows his narrative down to Hora describing how convenient its location is from Addis Ababa. The piece is mainly about the attractiveness of Hora Arsadi and how much the country can benefit from promoting it as a tourist destination. Hora is described as the best for boat rides and bird watching. Deneke says there are over a hundred different kinds of birds, fish and other reptiles that may be seen if one visits Hora. And the forest that surrounds the lake is another attraction one should not miss. The author also points out that the presence of Ras Hotel and its accessibility to ordinary citizens makes any trip worthwhile. He remarks that the revolutionary era has brought an end to the feudal ownership of the hotel and that it is open to anyone, unlike the past when it was exclusively used by the royal family. As he promotes the area for international tourism, the author tries to inspire local visitors as well. Nevertheless, in these writings there is no mention of Irreecha as a possible tourist attraction.⁵ By reconfiguring Hora Arsadi as a recreational and touristic site, both regimes systematically dissociate the ritual and the place of its celebration and reinvented it as a pass-time spot. As discussed in chapter 2, the discourses on Irreecha were disparaging the ritual in both cases. While the empire saw it as a non-orthodox, alien and paganistic practice the military regime regarded it as backward and anti-progress. So, it is not surprising that both tried to delink the 'beautiful' landscape from the 'undesirable' ritual and thereby prepared it for economic gain from tourism.

Just like its two predecessors, EPRDF's Ethiopia has focused on tourism and investment but added the question of ethnic identity, as mapped onto Hora Arsadi. EPRDF too is enthusiastic about revitalising Hora Arsadi as a tourist attraction that can be used to generate income by appealing to the touristic and recreational imaginary. However, for EPRDF promoting Hora Arsadi was not without challenges, which had to begin with developing the site that seems to have been neglected for some time. Belay and Debebe, who are gatekeepers to the sacred lake, told me the state of Hora Arsadi immediately before the EPRDF came. They maintained that Hora Arsadi was a deserted area. It was not looked after, and it was dry, rough, thorny, stony, and hence uninhabitable. Professor Mesfin Abebe took personal initiative to restore its greenery. He organised a scheme known as 'Megeb läsera' (food for work) in which he brought

5 Deneke Berhanu. (1975 EC) Hora: yāTurisem Mäseheb. *Addis Zāmān*, 16 T'e'q'emet, p. 2.

the local youth together to plant indigenous trees in the vicinity of the lake. He made sure that the trees were planted in a circular shape so that they also serve as a fence, creating a boundary that sets the area apart from the surroundings.⁶ In Professor Mesfin's own words:

I have always been fascinated by that place, ever since I knew it, although I began to involve myself in working at the site in 1992. This time, I decided to do something about restoring it to its previous splendour. I also wanted to make it a better place for those people who come and worship. I then used the opportunity my position gave me to transform it. The fact that it has been a place of worship since ancient times and the need to restore its glory, to make it convenient for worshippers, are what motivated me to maintain it. Before the 1991 change of government you do not see many people coming here. Immediately after, if anything, you may see a maximum of two hundred to three hundred people. Even the limited number of participants from the local area were not sure about the consequences of coming here. They were fearful regardless of the regime change. When I started maintaining the place, the local people were sceptical about what was to happen to it. They were wondering whether it was given to individual investors for hotel expansion. Gradually, it became clear that the motive of restoring the place to its grandeur was rather meant for the worshippers. This encouraged people to come and exercise their religious freedom more openly.⁷

But apart from what Professor Mesfin did in the 1990s, there is little that has been done to develop the area by the authorities, to enable it to accommodate the tourist flow alongside the Irreecha celebrants, according to Dandi. Dandi, an expert in the regional state's culture and tourism bureau, continues:

We have [as an office] failed to do what we were supposed to do in developing it into a proper tourist attraction. We have not created a platform for tourists to make them understand how they should participate in the ritual. It is a site from which a lot of income could be generated, but due to the lack of the necessary infrastructure, like a museum, the regional state is not benefiting as much as it should. But now, museums are planned to be set up in response to the increasing number of tourists

6 Field notes from 2012.

7 Mesfin Abebe. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (23 March 2013).

coming for the celebration. Due to the positive outlook the government has towards Irreecha, it is focusing on developing the area.⁸

In an attempt to tackle this, there has been an aggressive move to make Hora Arsadi attractive to investors, tourists and ritual participants alike. Reviving Irreecha is vital as a source of income for the regional state and also to turn the city into a tourist destination in the region. This adds another dimension to the role Irreecha is playing in the business of advertising, as it is used as a cultural artefact to promote the city, the region and the country at large. It is being reconfigured as a tourist attraction in a way that fits into the curious tourist gaze. Together with the ritual, the city is also being promoted as a tourist destination not just in the regional state but in the Horn of Africa region as well, according to the ambitions put forward by the city mayor.⁹ For instance, upon entrance to the city, a big billboard welcomes celebrants, and besides promoting Irreecha, the city is advertised as a tourist hub. It says, “Welcome to Bishoftu, the hub of cultures, land of lakes and source of tourism”. In pamphlets distributed to Irreecha participants by the Bishoftu City municipality, it is written that Irreecha is celebrated not only to reflect the Oromo tradition but also to enhance democracy, tourism and the city’s economy. The hotels, restaurants and resorts, the city’s proximity to the capital and its good weather are a few of the points emphasised while advertising Bishoftu in the context of the celebration of Irreecha.¹⁰ It is not surprising that both on the eve and the day of the celebration, the tourist influx is a big source of income that the city municipality counts on. This is why it is working to further expand the economic benefits obtained.

Unlike the previous regimes, EPRDF’s Ethiopia accepted Irreecha as a ritual that marks Oromo religious identity and Hora Arsadi as a sacred site of celebration. The economic activities are conducted within the framework of capitalising Irreecha’s potential for mobilising investors as well as tourists. Nevertheless, in their practice, officials perceive Hora Arsadi as an economic source as well as a point of political game play, but not as the sacred space that ordinary participants see it as.¹¹ As a result, this mixture and more specifically the presentation of Hora Arsadi as a tourist attraction is met with strong

8 Dandi Negewo. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (5 October 2013). Recently, the local bureau and the Aba Gada council have started fundraising to build a museum at Hora Arsadi.

9 Kefyalew Ayana, the then mayor, alluded to this in his speech at the 2014 celebration of Irreecha.

10 Bishooftuu Dachee Harowwanii: Bulchinsa Magaala Bishooftuu, Bara 2006.

11 Mesfin Abebe. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (23 March 2013).

resistance by others who have a different commitment to the site. Some accuse the government of reducing the sacred space, making it ordinary by making it accessible to all sorts of people who come in the name of tourism. The regional state is frowned upon for opening Hora Arsadi to certain sections of visitors who have no respect for the site. By promoting it for tourists, Hora Arsadi is made open for all 'non-believers', by way of which the 'real practitioners' are exposed to those who insult and disrespect them.¹² Those who regard the place with ~~awe and reverence~~ oppose this action arguing that the commercialisation is a blasphemous act, an act that compromises the sacredness of Hora Arsadi. Stating his criticism of the commercialisation, for instance, Professor Mesfin poses the question, "Do they [state officials] do this to churches or mosques?" By raising this question, he argues that the regional state is tampering with the spirituality of the sacred site and that other religious institutions are not commoditised because they have structures and institutions that protect the interest of their followers.

Similarly, Aba Gadas and other influential community leaders are expressing their concern about the 'encroachment' by investors on the sacred lake. According to some members of the Tulema Gada council, people who do not have respect for the Oromo culture do some of these things without taking into account the status of the lake. They point fingers at officials who are leasing parts of the sacred land, accusing them of being against the values of Oromo people. Caalaa, himself an official in the culture and tourism bureau of Bishoftu, ponders the paradox, observing that Irreecha has never been free from persecution, even under the EPRDF. This, according to Caalaa, is mainly expressed through the regional state's audacity in leasing the sacred lake and its surroundings out to investors.¹³ The situation reached its climax when the regional state agreed to lease the entire lake to one of the richest tycoons in the country. Eventually, the public showed a collaborative resistance that forced the regional state to withdraw the offer. Professor Mesfin stated that he made a lot of effort to stop the selling of the lake as it implied the end of Irreecha. The professor used his connections with influential personalities, particularly those he considered sympathetic towards Irreecha ~~and the site of its celebration~~. He also managed to obtain media attention that enabled him to disseminate the information to Oromo who live abroad.¹⁴ The resulting public uproar saved Hora Arsadi from conversion to a resort in its entirety.

¹² Kuma Idea. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (16 February 2013 and 20 November 2013).

¹³ Caalaa Sori. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (27 November 2013).

¹⁴ Mesfin Abebe. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (23 March 2013).

Despite the fact that the entire lake was not sold, the expansion of hotels and resorts that encroach on its boundaries from all sides has continued. One such resort aggressively expanding into the lake area is Kuriftu. When the Aba Gadas challenged the ~~municipal government~~ as to why the administrators had sold this land for the expansion of Kuriftu resort, the head of the municipality said he was ordered to do so by his bosses.¹⁵ But according to Caalaa, it is impossible that an Oromo official made such a decision. According to him, “No Oromo would allow this to happen to a sacred site that is revered by the nation”. Rather, he continued, “It is because the person who was in charge of land at the time was from a different ethnic background”.¹⁶ Caalaa reframed the matter as an identity issue, suggesting that if an Oromo did such a thing, his or her identity as Oromo is questionable. For him, only members of other ethnic groups care little about the value the Oromo ascribe to the lake. As far as Caalaa is concerned, being an Oromo should make one stand as a defender of the sacred site. He implies that the place is tied to an Oromo identity where Oromoness is engraved.¹⁷

~~Since Hora Arsadi is one of the lakes situated in a beautiful landscape, it is not surprising that it appeals to tourists and investors.~~ What is observed because of the promotion of Hora Arsadi for investment is that sacred sites like this instigate conflict between developers seeking the land for investment and religious groups who assert its indivisibility. On the side of the investors, the driving motive is financial, while for the religious groups the priority is to keep the sacredness intact. This competition can, at times, lead to violent confrontations that end with destruction. In the case of Hora Arsadi, the lake and its vicinity have appealed to investors who have state backing. Promoting the tourism and hotel industry is part of the current regime’s determination to ~~become~~ a middle income country, which requires creating opportunities

15 I have been informed recently that the Kuriftu is barred from continuing the expansion of the resort.

16 Field notes from February 2013 and Interview with Caala Sori.

17 Another perspective is that giving the land away to investors, or threatening to do so, is one manifestation of the government’s attitude towards the increasing popularity of Irreecha at Hora Arsadi. Dandi agrees with Caalaa’s assertion and adds, “Part of the reason why politicians wanted to give the land away to investors is because they associate it with OLF. And selling it to a ~~neutral~~ investor means defusing the pressure that comes from the public which supports OLF”. Seen from the point of view of managing it in order to protect and safeguard the reigning political order, selling out instead of keeping it as a site of ritual for the Oromo public is more beneficial to the state because it halts the opposition. Hora Arsadi is believed to bring together. Thus, avoiding what is perceived to groom dissidence is one way of governing in the interest of staying ~~in~~ power. Dandi Negewo. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (5 October 2013).

for local as well as foreign investors. All the regional states within the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia are competing to attract investors in their respective regions. Oromia is also making a great effort to attract investors, and a few of the natural endowments that it can capitalise on are fertile land and beautiful landscape. For the regional state, it is natural to lease ~~it~~ to investors if it brings more money, particularly when compared to its value as a sacred site for Irreecha celebrants. The state supports the investors who are attracted by the material benefits the lake ~~can provide~~. It makes absolute sense for a 'secular' state whose priorities are not promoting religion but growth and transformation. So long as 'economic progress' is central to the logic of the state and the ways in which it mobilises resources, maintaining the site for the spiritual value adherents ascribe to it does not make much sense, if anything, it is self-defeating. This creates tensions between the investors and the believers, reminding us of Bourdieu's (1985) field theory in which actors play games. What happens here is a contradiction as on the one hand there are investors and on the other there are devotees, and yet their standing in the competitive field has imbalances as both parties have different positions as well as socio-political and economic capital that enables or hampers them from winning the game. In this case, the investors are favoured as they appeal to the state's policy of developing the economy through investment. For example, the fact that Kuriftu resort managed to get the plot of land on which Lomi and her followers perform the ritual is an interesting case. Attracting investors to areas which embody a group's identity exposes the tensions of implementing ethnic federalism in a state context which at the same time prioritises economic development above all. Ethnic federalism as a state ideology promotes and claims to respect the cultural and religious rights of groups, and yet the idea of the developmental state is founded on the commitment to boosting economic growth at any cost, even if it means compromising rights such as respecting and protecting sacred sites and practices. This dialectic of creating two different positions within the same state structure is an interesting manifestation of the ambivalence with which the regional state, and by extension the federal state, attempt to handle identity and development questions. This, in turn, is leading to the contestation of the site either by advocates of identity politics or business developers. It is not far-fetched to argue that Hora Arsadi is not only a space of competition between the state and its opponents, but also a demonstration of inconsistencies within the state ideology itself.

From the above descriptions, it is clear that one of the entry points that could be mobilised to assess the nature of Ethiopian state politics is the manner in which different regimes deal with what is regarded as hallowed land that hosts the deities. Gerardus van der Leeuw (1963) offers an insightful view on sacred

spaces. Once a given area is recognised as powerful, based on that recognition, it is selected, avoided, strengthened or enfeebled. ~~If we go by~~ this proposition, we can see that Ethiopia's regimes have followed similar courses of action in relation to Hora Arsadi at different times. There is a continuation as regards the state's presence at Hora Arsadi across all three regimes. The discontinuity emanates from the divergent ways in which the regimes appropriated and opted to relate to Hora Arsadi, switching between enfeebling and strengthening it. What started with Fairfield Palace persisted with successive regimes that continued to display different forms of relationship with the sacred site, capturing ambivalences rather than straightforward sanction or rejection. Though all three ~~seem to have~~ had different economic policies and political ideologies, investment and recreation are the two shared aspects that continued to feature in all three regimes. Although it led to the fragmentation and contestation of the site by different groups, the state's consistent presence also affirms the existence of an 'invisible' spiritual power that they do not want to explicitly acknowledge but which their attendance confirms. Hora Arsadi is a site at which two or more powers collide; obviously the spiritual and the temporal. Based on this, Hora Arsadi can be defined as what Chidester and Linenthal (1995) call a hybrid sacred space, one in which politics and religion merge. The logic of dovetailing here is not based on the assumption that religion and politics are juxtaposed or the theoretical debate that rejects a strict division between religion and politics (Asad 2003), but on the logic of the constitutional provision on non-interference that post-1974 revolution Ethiopia adopted.¹⁸

2 Venue of Self-Presentation

Apart from establishing itself at the site through various materialities, there is a performative aspect of the state's presence that becomes more visible at the actual time of the Irreecha celebration. I choose three interrelated items

¹⁸ During the 19th century territorial expansion of the imperial state to the southern parts of present-day Ethiopia, Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity (EOC) was able to establish itself in the newly conquered areas through considerable construction of churches. Since the church's mission was to convert people in the newly conquered areas, uproot the hitherto practiced religions and replace them with Orthodox Christianity, it used different approaches, one of which was destroying the sacred spaces where indigenous religious rituals were performed. The destruction of these centres resulted in spatial and temporal alteration. Some rituals began to be performed secretly at homesteads while others were abandoned ~~as bad practices~~. While this is the historical context explaining the general trend, the dynamics at Hora Arsadi ensued ~~through~~ a different trajectory, which materialised through the construction of the palace.

to explain the performative modes of self-presentation deployed by the state under EPRDF. Self-presentation is used as Erving Goffman (1965) intended, to mean the attempt by the state to performatively manage impressions and thereby consolidate itself on firm ground using various mediums of communication. In so doing, the state affirms its sovereignty over the people as well as its potential competitors. In the first I aggregate patronage, participation of and speech by authorities, whereby the state emerges as a custodian of the ritual and establishes itself as respectful to things that matter to the Oromo people. The second aspect is aggregated as media and advertisement whereby the state communicates the categories of thoughts and visions it produces to the participants. The audience taken into account includes not only those who are present on the spot but also those attending the celebration from elsewhere on the media.

3 Patronage, Participation and Speech

3.1 *A History*

There is an ongoing debate about Emperor Haile Selassie's position regarding the ritual performances as well as his involvement. This is ~~more~~ so because of the questions and speculations raised due to his frequent visit to the lake. For some it has everything to do with the sacredness of the lake due to the spirits, while for others it is nothing except the recreational value tied to the geographical environment. In this line, Beka, an artist and a teacher at the Addis Ababa University, recollects his childhood memories of growing up in Bishoftu, saying:

As a young lad back then, I used to wait for Friday evenings with anticipation because my friends and I knew the Emperor would come. Every time he came, we were given bread and money and no child wanted to miss that. He was never driven to the palace. The car stopped in the city and he walked to the palace. That was the time for us to get our money and bread. Even if there were foreign visitors, they would come with him, because it was important that he came to Bishoftu. He walked to the lake the next morning all alone, or if Lej Taye¹⁹ was around he accompanied

¹⁹ Others also witnessed that Haile Selassie used to perform the ritual with Lej Taye, (a popular spirit medium who was active in the Fereqesa spiritual centre of Arsi zone in Oromia region). He was a good friend of the Emperor and a patriot who was involved in the struggle against the Italian invasion in the 1930s (Alula 1994). Lej Taye participated

him. Our parents were convinced that he had connections with the ritual, which in a way gave their ritual performances some sort of validation. And I think he was ordered by a ritual expert to walk alone.²⁰

Many also agree that because he wanted to avoid public attention, the Emperor used to perform the ritual discreetly on a different date and on another side of the sacred lake, far from where people gather.²¹ According to Caalaa (2013) however, what the Emperor performed was not Irreecha but a ritual to call and consult the spirits in the water under the guidance of the spirit mediums coming from Faraqasa. This discourse is generally propagated by those who attempt to dissociate anything Oromo from the Emperor, as they believe that he was the embodiment of the Christian-Abyssinian exploitive system that oppressed the Oromo. It is also part of the attempt at denigrating the Emperor as a worshipper of 'evil spirits' with which the Oromo have nothing to do except by the bad coincidence of the Emperor choosing to carry out his superstitious activities at the Oromo sacred lake.

On the other hand, the conversation I had with one of the Emperor's relatives who, as a young boy, used to follow him to the Fairfield Palace to spend weekends, has something different to say. For him, Bishoftu is a preferred destination for its location, a beautiful city with a lot of lakes and greenery. Sahlemariam strongly believes that the Emperor, although he went to the lake alone in the morning, had nothing to do with any ritual or spirit. He said, "I would even say the Emperor may have attended, but not as a regular visitor and practitioner of the ritual. Rather, he liked mingling with people; he was accessible and curious about everybody who saw him ... So it was all because of his nature. Moreover, it was a fascinating practice. As a child, I remember how fascinated I was by it. I even remember the huge tree. But Irreecha was a fringe not mainstream ritual back then."²² ~~Whatever motive took him to the lake, it is safe to argue that the Emperor had, if not anything else, 'tolerated' the ritual.~~

Be this as it may, his contribution as a 'guardian' of the ritual is locally acknowledged. For instance, at some point the local clergy and the aristocrats were lobbying to build an Orthodox Church at the spot where the ritual takes

in the celebration of Irreecha every year, travelling from his centre. On the first day, he celebrated with his followers where people were able to see him. The week after, he accompanied the Emperor towards Hora Arsadi, where they performed the ritual together. Debebe Kasse. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (23 November 2013). Belay Shiferaw. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (23 July 2012).

20 Beka Nemera. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (18 March 2018).

21 Belay Shiferaw. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (23 July 2012).

22 Sahlemariam Asafa. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (23 March 2018).

place. One of them, Ras Mesfin Sileshi, organised police forces to threaten the local people on the day Irreecha was celebrated and stop them from performing the ritual. Ras Mesfin collaborated with the churchmen from the nearby St. Rufael Orthodox Church and ordered Fat'no dārash (an Amharic name for anti-riot police) to travel from Addis Ababa. The attempt by the Fat'no dārash was stifled by participants, and so they did not succeed in discontinuing the procession. Haile Selassie heard of this incident later on and said, "Leave them alone. It is their tradition" (Caalaa 2013). In this way the Emperor 'rescued' the ritual and so the celebration continued. This story was shared by most of the women and men I talked to. The following account from an elderly man is revealing about the celebration of Irreecha during the time of the Emperor. For Kebede, who mostly romanticised the past in his narratives, the good old days had gone with Haile Selassie. He comments that "Irreecha was very good during his time".²³

However, despite his gesture and its message that the authorities must 'tolerate' Irreecha, Haile Selassie's reputation as a 'good' Orthodox Christian partly explains why he refrained from acting as its patron, at least publicly. There was also a more serious danger associated with openly acknowledging the ritual as a public holiday. For the Emperor, beyond the effort to maintain a reputation and an image, there was the question of political power on which the church seemed to have the ultimate say. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which was critical of Irreecha and other non-Orthodox Christian religious practices in the country, was a strong political force. It had been involved in the making and unmaking of kings and emperors for centuries, and this includes Haile Selassie himself. From historical precedents, it is clear that the church had the power to excommunicate him as it did Lej Eyasu, among other things, for his association with Muslim communities. Thus, avoiding the risk of interference with his political power might have informed his ambivalent relationship with the religious ritual and the place of its celebration.

Irreecha took a different course during the military regime (1974–1991), which claimed to have adopted the principles of 'scientific socialism'. Generally, religions were depicted as anti-progress, backward, and above all, collaborators with the exploitive imperial regime. For the military regime, the agenda was socialism, and any attempt to encourage the essentialisation of the Irreecha celebration as an Oromo event ran the risk of fostering the ethno-nationalist sentiments that had begun flourishing during the imperial era. For instance, a debate that took place between Kuma Ide'a and Tsegaye Debalqe concerning the meaning of Irreecha started in the Addis Zāmān newspaper in Yākatit 1968

23 Kebede Tikse. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (16 March 2013).

EC.²⁴ The debate revolved around what constitutes a true culture and what is superstitious and backward. While Tsegaye advocated for the banning of such practices as 'backward and out of date', Kuma asserted that such practices are sources of knowledge, ~~inter alia~~, about people. He also asserted that Tsegaye misunderstood the notion of identity, explaining that it does not necessarily contradict the Marxist ideals that seem to inform Tsegaye's thought. This debate stopped after the second round of publication due to pressure from the officials. According to Kuma (who wrote the rejoinder to Tsegaye), officials were afraid of instigating an 'unnecessary dialogue' that might escalate to an unforeseen conflict between the Oromo and the government.²⁵ Thus the Därg opted to avoid Irreecha, keeping it out of the public scene as a tactic of managing the event, because it was more a threat than a support base for the state while potentially serving as a rallying spot for 'anti-revolutionary groups' like the young OLF. The military regime seemed to have remained watchful of the ritual while keeping a certain distance.

The Emperor was not necessarily hostile towards Irreecha nor was the Därg although it was critical of such religious practices. If anything, the society was generally engulfed by the fear that overwhelmed the country at the time and began self-regulating, but the Därg did not ban Irreecha even though it did not create the conditions for its thriving.²⁶ A more convincing argument might be that certain ideas of modernity ~~and progress~~ have played a key role in detaching most from their so-called 'cultural roots'. Being modern, in the past, was viewed within the framework of leaving behind so-called 'traditional' values, as they drag one backwards.²⁷ Moreover, ethnic politics was downplayed in both of the prior regimes. To identify with an ethnic group was not appreciated as the regimes promoted a national identity which nullified difference, perceiving it as a threat to maintaining the unity that makes the country

24 Tsegaye Debalqe. (1968 EC) Bāagul lemad lay Zāmācha. *Addis Zāmān*, 17 Yākatit, p. 5. Kuma Ide'a. (1968 EC) Bahel yāand hezb mawāqia māsaria nāw. *Addis Zāmān*, 20 Yākatit, p. 7.

25 Kuma Idea. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (20 November 2013).

26 Everyone that lived in Bishoftu in both regimes disputes the claim that Irreecha was banned. What I gathered from my conversations was that it was practised but EPRDF's Irreecha has seen a large number of participants together with its increasing Oromoisation. This claim about the banning of Irreecha under past regimes seems to have stemmed from a zeal for self-legitimation. It is part of the attempt to magnify ~~their~~ position as freedom fighters who 'redeemed' the once banned cultural as well as religious practices of one of the country's oppressed nations. Moreover, it is part of the commitment of the current regime to negate or dismiss the previous regimes, as doing so seems to be an act of self-ratification as a corrector of past injustices.

27 Beka Nemera. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (18 March 2018).

stand as a united nation-state. Ethiopianness was promoted at the expense of Oromoness or identification with any other ethnic identity. Emphasising ethnic identities and the expression thereof was regarded as narrow nationalism before the change of 1991. To endorse Irreecha in that era came across as ‘unfit’ for the times, not something that served as a source of pride. This changed with ethnic federalism, a principle built on treasuring group identity.

3.2 *1991 and Afterwards*

Unlike in the past when people were compelled to erase their ethnic tags, ethnic identity has now been endorsed as a source of pride in the post-1991 era. Contemporary identity discourse in Ethiopia and globally, coupled with ethnic federalism, laid the foundation for the politicised turn towards Irreecha after the 1991 change of regime. Regarding respect of the rights of the nations, nationalities and peoples, section ‘a’ of article 2 of the Transitional Period Charter of 1991 reads, “[E]ach nation, nationality and people is guaranteed the right to preserve its identity and have it respected, promote its culture and history and use and develop its language”. These ground-breaking provisions were further established upon the promulgation of the 1995 Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic Ethiopia.²⁸

The new constitution elaborated on the above provisions and affirmed them. It also added secularist principles of rule where the separation of the two spheres is clearly spelt out. Articles 11 and 27 of the 1995 constitution are the main provisions regarding religious freedom. Article 11 reads, “State and religion are separate, there shall be no state religion, the state shall not interfere in religious matters and religion cannot interfere in state affairs.” Concerning religious freedom, article 27 reads, “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include the freedom to hold or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and the freedom, either individually or in community with others, and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.”

The following quote from one of my interlocutors captures the general sentiment in response to the declaration of ~~the~~ freedom to celebrate one’s religious and ethnic identity:

In the past, let alone the idea of Oromo religion, the Oromo language itself was discouraged from usage because the governments undertook an assimilation policy. Menelik, Haile Selassie and Mengistu were ~~especially~~ hard on the Oromo because they were the majority [ethnic group]; they

²⁸ Transitional Period Charter of Ethiopia. (1991). *Nägarit Gazéta*. 22 July, p. 1.

have a lot of resources the country relies on. So it was important for the rulers to bring them under their control and one of the ways they used was to Amharanise them, make them speak their language and follow their religion at the expense of the Oromo language and religion. Even Haile Selassie, who was an Oromo, made sure that the Oromo language and religion never revived. The Därg also followed the same strategy to bring unity of the country through socialism and one language, Amharic. This, for the Oromo, meant abandoning their cultural assets and adopting the Amaharanised version of identity. As a result, the Oromo were not allowed to talk about their religion in public, or preach it, and anything related to promoting it was not possible for them. If anyone dared to promote their language or religion, they would either be imprisoned or tortured to death. This has now changed dramatically.²⁹

Lomi Deme, a spirit medium ~~who lives close to Hora Arsadi~~, shares Alemu's opinion and states:

People rejoiced in the fact that the new government openly said that there is freedom of religion. This necessitated a change, marking revival, in the spirit possession cults at the celebration of Irreecha. Now, the previously secret and silent spirits began to be visible through their mediums because even the spirits were excited. People began to be more confident about coming for the celebration and they began to exercise their religion freely after Ihadig [EPRDF] came to power. All those people who abandoned Hora Arsadi because of fear turned their face towards it. They stopped going to other places and started coming here on not only the main day of the celebration but also every time they have issues to address.³⁰

Diribi Demissie, ~~who was the chairperson of MTA before it was banned in 2004 and~~ an ardent opponent of the ruling party, concurs that a lot of positive changes were registered after the change of government. Diribi continued:

I cannot deny the change because I hate these people [he meant the current rulers]. Especially the introduction of the new Constitution, except that it has a problem of implementation, is a big step in achieving equality. All those activities carried out at Hora Arsadi and Bishoftu were

29 Alemu Serbesa. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (22 November 2013).

30 Lomi Deme. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (5 October 2013).

possible because of the Constitution. Even when they detained us, we told them it is our right to celebrate our religion according to the constitution, so nobody can stop us from exercising it.³¹

Beginning from September 1991, the number of participants going for Irreecha celebrations was growing, as was the state's ambivalence in the years to come. As discussed in chapter 2, the role of MTA in popularising the ritual is inestimable. So the 1991 introduction of ethnic federalism was a breakthrough for the Oromo and others in the country who cherished their religious and ethnic identity.

3.3 *Towards Patronage*

The regional state's culture and tourism bureau took over the organisation of Irreecha a few years after the banning of MTA in 2004. Although this marked the overt insertion of the state into the affairs of Irreecha, it does not mean that before 2004 the regime was indifferent to the increasing popularity of the ritual and the number of people it drew. The increased voices of dissidence and the continued association of the ritual with OLF were in fact disturbing, even though no direct action was taken to bar it other than just policing it.³² But a lacuna created as a result of MTA's removal opened the door for the involvement of the state, through the RSCTB as patron.

In addition to MTA's removal from the scene of Irreecha, national developments in the political atmosphere in Ethiopia also triggered further interest in the event. The political situation related to the national election of 2005 was disconcerting for the federal government. The pre-election political developments were alarming because of the national support one of the unionist parties obtained. During election campaigning, the now defunct political party known as the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (henceforth CUD) was critical of ethnic federalism. The party insisted that such a divisive state ideology was a threat to national unity and integration as it restructured the country based on ethnicity, which emphasises difference. According to the CUD, the strong boundaries built along ethnic lines were polarising the country, with the potential for insurmountable ethnic cleavages and even conflicts. This party earned strong support, especially from the educated elites and the majority of urban dwellers. In an attempt to counter their own intimidation, the ruling party then made gestures to endorse ethno-nationalist sentiments, of which Irreecha was a part. Irreecha was chosen to highlight the privileges

31 Diribi Demissie. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (20 October 2013).

32 Dereje Gemed. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (13 September 2013).

ethnic federalism brought to previously subordinated groups. The card the EPRDF played aroused fear that the unionist party would compromise the rights of different ethno-religious groups by dragging Ethiopia back to the old days, where the religious and cultural values of one or two ethnic groups dominated the rest. By taking such a strategy, EPRDF attempted to secure the support of other political parties organised along ethnic lines, as well as the public in general.³³

In 2008, when the Ethiopian millennium was celebrated, it was recognised by the government as a major holiday. The regional state combined the celebration of the millennium with Irreecha. This marked the re-definition of Irreecha as “a ritual of peace, the day of development, unity, tourism, Oromoness”.³⁴ The experts worked closely with the Aba Gadas “until things got a proper shape”.³⁵ As officials in the RSCTB, the support they extended to enhance Irreecha is part of the country’s commitment to promoting diversity as stipulated in the constitution. The bureau is taking this assignment just as it is done with Ashānda in Amhara and Tigray regions as well as with Fiché Chāmbālala in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region.³⁶ According to the then commissioner of RSCTB Mohamed Jilo, it became clear that Irreecha concerns their office directly as the culture and tourism office. Hence, they decided to “work in collaboration with the Aba Gadas to promote it”.³⁷ On the other hand, the regional state’s representatives remark that the ideology of OLF seems to have influenced the Oromo youth, especially at Irreecha celebrations. This statement has been used by officials to justify Irreecha’s appropriation by the state as a process of depoliticising and pacifying it, where depoliticising means setting it free from the OLF, which is already an act that politicises the ritual. Along these lines, commissioner Mohamed Jilo comments that “Irreecha is not

33 However, the post-election scenario changed following disagreements on the result of election. The disagreement escalated to riots and protests on the streets of Addis Ababa as well as other big cities, causing the death and arrest of hundreds in addition to destruction of properties. On the celebration of Irreecha in September 2005, grievances and disappointments due to the post-election developments including the death toll that occurred were expressed in different ways. Tamru Hailu. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (28 July 2012). Tefera Negesse. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (28 July 2012).

34 Caalaa Sori. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (23 March 2013).

35 Mohamed Jilo. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (24 October 2013).

36 Ashānda is a quasi-religious celebration in Tigray and Amhara regions of Ethiopia. It is held in August, just before the commencement of the Ethiopian New Year. Fiché Chāmbālala is the new year celebration in the SNNPR. Both festivals are promoted by their respective regional states as a demonstration of the granting of religious and cultural rights.

37 Mohamed Jilo. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (24 October 2013).

a political front. We know there are oppositions [he meant members of OLF and others like the youth group] who want to use it for their destructive political purposes. But this has to stop.”³⁸

Asserting the positive achievements Irreecha exhibited after the regional state’s bureau stepped in, Alemu resonates with the statement above, saying:

Our intervention altered the stage and day of celebration from conflict-ridden to a stable, peaceful thanksgiving day. It has now become a festival where people pray for reconciliation. The shift has succeeded significantly, and it can never revert to its chaotic state. From the very beginning, it was difficult for us to penetrate because there was a lot of resistance. But gradually the local community started supporting us and now we have even built stages for the Aba Gadas and other guests. All politicians want to use the event to their advantage. Especially the OLF wanted it to promote its divisive politics. There were a lot of skirmishes and competitions in that area before we intervened and started organising it.³⁹

In such a manner, the regional state claimed victory by dint of having converted Irreecha into a ‘peaceful celebration’. By now, the city has invested in the construction of a big stage far from where the MTA built its stage in 2002. This new stage is a point of intersection between the rulers and the ruled as the public gathers to listen to the prayers, speeches and also to be entertained by the music and other performances.

Here politicians approach the public through their presence, as participating in the ritual is perceived to narrow the distance between the state and its subordinates. The officials’ presence gives the public the impression that it is being recognised. Confirming this, Alemu from ORSCTB states:

Among other things, people believe in the person who is respecting them; they will love him and appreciate him. They would think that the official came to celebrate with us because he respects our culture. It is important for the government in order to stay in power, as it secures the support of the people whose culture it respects. Especially during elections, the government collects votes and support by actively getting involved in such events and supporting the community by endorsing what they value. So for the government it is like a market; it is a market of votes. The officials are given the stage to speak, then they transfer messages that can be

³⁸ Mohamed Jilo. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (24 October 2013).

³⁹ Alemu Serbesa. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (22 November 2013).

compared to reporting what they are doing, what they want to do, etc. It is a stage for the government to promote itself and buy popular support.⁴⁰

Quite paradoxically, because he opposed the “conversion of Irreecha to a political arena by OLF”, commissioner Mohamed Jilo also believes that “Irreecha is a site of mobilisation where issues like poverty alleviation, development and peace are addressed. The ruling party uses it only for mobilising the society for development. We transfer messages as elected representatives of the people. We do not assume that every participant is our supporter or member; we do not!”⁴¹ As he stated, “guests from the regional state come and make speeches to mobilise the society because we have a stance that [the stage] should also serve as a platform for political mobilisation. This has a big benefit for us because we use it to encourage people.”⁴² Authorities that are not normally easily approached, appearing only on the television screen, seem to be accessible and are seen addressing the public as well as doing what the public does. By facilitating closer contact between the rulers and the ruled, Hora Arsadi introduces a different modality through which we can appreciate the emergence of, as far as the state's perception goes, intimacies between the rulers and the ruled.

4 The Speeches

State delegates make speeches concerning the political, social and economic progress and development the country registered after EPRDF came to power. They present the party as the sole defender of democracy, of the kind Ethiopia has never seen before. The state here is presented as an agent of change, champion of religious and cultural freedom, as well as promoter of Irreecha. Irreecha is an instrument used to forge intimacy, a space where the state seeks public consent through its presence. What happened during the 2014 celebration affirms Alemu's statement above. In a speech that the head of the Bishoftu city municipality, Kefyalew Ayana, made on October 5, 2014, as stated in the introduction to this book, he campaigned for election.⁴³

40 Alemu Serbesa. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (22 November 2013).

41 Mohamed Jilo. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (24 October 2013).

42 Mohamed Jilo. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (24 October 2013).

43 Speech made by Kefyalew Ayana, the then city mayor of Bishoftu. From field notes, October 5, 2014.

In the 2008 celebration, Abadula Gameda, then president of the Oromia regional state, was present, which was already a validation of the ritual as he was the first state dignitary to appear after a few years. He spoke right after the prayer session, where he started by alluding to the prayers as follows:

We have heard prayers poured out by our fathers, there is no need to repeat it since they have said it very well. From the previous millennium, a beautiful tradition like this was left for us by our Oromo ancestors. We have to develop it more. We have to beautify it more. We have to keep and pass it on to the next generation. It is not only Waqqueffatas; all Oromos meet here and celebrate the holiday. They have to join hands and make an effort to develop our regional state. They have to struggle to get out of poverty. I wish it to be a happy holiday for all and I thank you.

As can be inferred from his speech, the message was that Irreecha is a symbol of unity and united Oromo should join hands and march against poverty to bring about the desired development. The priorities he raised run along social, political and economic lines. The speech made by the regional state's president has a tone of 'educating' participants, especially where he conveyed messages of political value that intended to build a united front, with the underlying assumption that there is consensus about the agenda raised, whereby the Oromo could stand for the common purpose of eradicating poverty as well as treasuring their traditions. His message is tied to the occasion in a way that enabled him to make working hard the moral duty of all responsible citizens to develop their country. Cognisant of the context of his speech, he made reference to the religious tradition as a cohesive device to advance the envisaged development, which is hoped to lead to a poverty-free Oromia. Using the sacred space, he met the people under his jurisdiction and passed his message on. Such occasions are otherwise a rarity for Ethiopian politicians, since not many people come out to attend meetings organised by government officials.

The Irreecha celebration is also a site of what Ronen (2008) calls 'responsibilisation'; an arena where reflexive subjectivities are nurtured. Irreecha is used as a site for ethical and social reorientation, where the wrongdoers are told to correct their deeds and behave as per the norms and values of Oromo society. The art of managing religion also lies in the ability to shape the behaviour of subjects under a given state. For instance, one of the MPs called Qäsis Belay Mekonnen, spoke about the bad habits the Oromo are indulging and pointed out that it is becoming a hindrance to development. He requested that the youth correct themselves. He said:

We children of the Oromo, especially the youth, should note, while having fun, that we have to take something with us when we go back from here. Our brothers [referring to the musicians] have been entertaining us and it will soon continue. However, there is something that we need to listen to. Something like food for thought to take with us. We Oromo have to change ourselves! We learn from the books that this country, Ethiopia, was rich in the first millennium. But now, people are not working hard; they rather take a lot of alcohol, get drunk and fight with each other. Jealousy, gossip and character assassination have become the order of the day. Stealing from one another, creating issues against one another seems normal. Because all of these bad things have flourished among us, we are being stricken by poverty [compared to our history]. In the future, however, especially when we celebrate the third millennium, we have to work very hard and change ourselves. We should note that someone who does not work and aspire to change is living in vain.

In this speech, the priest openly attributes poverty to culture and the society while shying away from criticising the state structure, historically embedded injustices, economic repression and global political and economic forces that are accountable for causing, reproducing and perpetuating poverty. He blamed the youth for being irresponsible and warned them to regulate their behaviour. He used his presence at Hora Arsadi as an opportunity to educate citizens about becoming obedient, and the moment this is uttered it is received with applause, which in turn might symbolise agreement.

On the same stage then Aba Gada Nagasa Nagawo strengthened the MPs' instructive interventions. He began by saying, "Here is my message to you":

Know your traditions! Believe in discussion! If you stop conspiring against each other and if we speak words of peace, then our country is peaceful. We have passed the age of war and conflict; we are in the era of development. Dear Oromo people, let you not beat each other, do not abandon each other, do not abandon your tradition, do not give it away. You are losing your beauty, losing your charisma, because you have ceased to respect and treasure what you have [...] Don't take a lot of alcohol, get drunk and spend the night outside your house. When you leave your houses in the morning you are peaceful people; when you return home later in the day you all get wild and crazy because of too much araqé [homemade hard liquor]. Stop araqé, destroy araqé. Don't steal from each other. This is not the attribute of the Oromo in history. Oromos never steal from each other, never fool one another, and never prosper at the expense of others.

Respect each other, respect your country; it is an era of development and there is no time to steal from each other, it is all about developing yourself. It is time to work hard. Those who steal are like dogs. The Oromo are a proud people; they never steal or facilitate it for others. [...] Protect yourselves from atrocities and diseases. People are dying of HIV/AIDS. It is killing our people. You have to resort to abstinence. Get free counselling services and get your blood tested; you can find them over there. Those of you who have the disease, get treatment; there are supplements you can get; and those who are free from it, get advice and be conscious so as not to get it. The disease is killing our youth; it is troubling us. In the past during the Därg regime, it was all news of the death of our loved ones in the war, but now we hear the bad news of death of our children because of HIV/AIDS. It does not come unless you go to it. So be careful. Do not throw yourselves into the fire.

The Aba Gada, as a community leader and one of the organisers of the ritual, is here taking the assignment of teaching the people about the value of peace and harmony in achieving development. He continues, drawing the attention of the participants to the moral values the Oromo should stick to. He makes statements about good and bad values based on the history of the Oromo and what is now happening. Death as a result of HIV/AIDS is compared to the havoc the country went through during the civil war. He warns the youth to avoid promiscuous sexual habits. What is more interesting and political about his speech is the fact that he compares the death caused by this disease with the death during the civil war. He praises the current regime for bringing peace and stability and directing energy towards development. While praising the government for the achievements, he puts all the blame for deaths on the participants. He makes it a problem on the side of the youth that they lack self-control and easily become prey for HIV/AIDS. Accordingly, he communicates that the state is doing the right thing by creating a stable system to enhance development, but citizens are failing to take advantage of the opportunity to change themselves and the country.

The Aba Gada is also knowledgeable about the value of education, gender equality and the benefit of sending girls to school. He is clearly into reform and believes in abandoning harmful traditions such as domestic violence and gender-based discrimination. Accordingly, he passes the message to participants saying “it is the era of education, learn and know what is good and bad for you. Look at the learned ones, they are better. We should educate our women. Stop abduction; abduction is for the bandits not for the Oromo. Let us leave backward traditions behind us and move on. This is what we need.”

Moreover, he is well informed about environmental problems. He states that the animals, the land and the forest should be well taken care of. Accordingly, he warns the participants to take good care of their cattle so that they give a lot of milk, which makes the Oromo richer. He goes on, saying, "Land of the Oromo is fertile, endowed with beautiful natural resources. We are destroying the forests. We have to plant new trees, we have to nurture those planted ones. Stop cutting trees." It is clear that his speech is framed on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). His is a textbook example of responsabilisation understood "as a call for action; an interpellation which constructs and assumes a moral agency and certain dispositions to social action that necessarily follow. It is an 'enabling praxis' and a technique of government that set into action a reflexive subjectivity" (Ronen 2008: p. 4). The state officials who seem to have realised the impact such personalities have, in terms of influencing and convincing people, are making use of the opportunity created by this ritual where the leader and the led meet to transmit messages about the state's concerns.

In such a manner, Hora Arsadi has become a stage where new forms of relationships with the state are created or renewed. Showing up during the celebration for the authorities has thus two advantages. As mentioned above by Alemu, it is a sign of respect for the public and what they treasure. Hora Arsadi is a theatre and the event is converted into a spectacle in which the state officials stage politics in the presence of spectators. It is also a site where politicians say what they believe the public would like to hear, hoping to cultivate consent. Authorities and state representatives entrench certain neoliberal values that emphasise individual responsibilities through which new subjectivities are produced in a way that they are outside of structural, historical and power constellations. Nevertheless, Lisa Wedeen (1999) in her stipulation of the "politics of as if" reminds us that it is possible that subjects, even members of the ruling party, may lack inner conviction about the state apparatus and yet publicly display commitment to the party/state. Assessing the same condition in Ethiopia, one can discern the ambivalence with which subjects relate to the state. At times they distance themselves from the state propaganda, which is far from their lived reality; at others they applaud it, giving the impression that they are loyal to the state's assertions that it is a champion of democracy, development and transformation. Even in the face of their awareness of the discrepancies between the propaganda and the actual practice, ordinary citizens may also appear to accept criticisms forwarded against them, as the MP and the Aba Gada have done in their respective speeches. Obedience and complacency are expressions of the conformity citizens perform when they find themselves in tricky situations. And yet the issue gets complicated, as the same

group of participants who seem to support the regime, although cynically, at the same time oppose it. This makes Irreecha a site of transgression where the state's power is also deconstructed, as well as alternatives imagined and put forward, as will be discussed in chapter 5.

5 Media and Advertisement

The connection of Irreecha to Ethiopian politics becomes even more vivid in the way state-run media frame the ritual. Identity, development, democracy, peace, stability and environmental concerns are the major vocabularies attached to any report or story about Irreecha, as will be shown in the examples I analyse below. Of particular note is the transformation of the ritual's depiction before and after an overt state intervention, which is highly visible insofar as it informs the evolution of media representation as well as the accompanying change and continuity on the ground. Irreecha is transformed into something media-friendly, consumable, and hence an appropriate item for coverage by the modern media. It is obvious that the media are not just instruments that transport messages concerning Irreecha but shape and transform the perceptions and reception, and to an extent they are also shaped by the increasing popularity and politicisation of the ritual itself.⁴⁴ Mostly the state-owned media serve as the mouthpiece of ideology and the information they disseminate regarding religion resonates with state articulations, what it emphasises or deemphasises while popularising a certain religion and practices attached to it.⁴⁵

44 Media in this context is used as a generic term to cover print, audio and audio-visual as well as digital media outlets that serve as platforms and have taken part in the process of creating and circulating discourses about Irreecha and also channels that bring the ritual to the attention of the public. My conceptualisation of mediatisation draws on Hoover's (2006) notion that views media in connection with practice. I have also relied on Andreas Hepp, Stig Hjarvard and Knut Lundby (2015) and Stig Hjarvard (2006), although their discussions mainly focus on the media that thrive in a liberal western context and focus less on the interplay of religion and media in a different political context like an authoritarian state. For instance, in the case of Ethiopia where there is almost no media freedom, it is important to pay attention to how state-controlled media outlets operate as agents and expressions of change and how this bears on the process of mediatisation.

45 In September 1975, a radio program was broadcast regarding Irreecha. That was the first and only program during the military regime. A journalist named Kuma Ide'a broadcast the program in both Amharic and Oromiffa languages. Kuma participated in the celebration and transmitted a program a week after the celebration. This radio program was criticised and the journalist was reproached for using the government media to 'misguide'

For example, *Kallacha Oromiyaa* is an Oromiffa weekly newspaper run by the Oromia regional state. Irreecha was the subject of the editorial published in September 2010. Titled ‘*Milkaa’ina kabaja ayyaana irreechaaf*’ (for the success of Irreecha celebration), the piece calls on participants to collaborate with the security forces in order to hold a peaceful celebration. The editorial starts by condemning the past regimes for their repressive approach to the Oromo in general and their religion in particular. It then praises the current regime for introducing democracy and creating a conducive atmosphere for the Oromo to celebrate their ritual. The editorial emphasises the potential of Irreecha as a tourist attraction to the extent that the growth of Bishoftu depends on it. Finally, what makes the 2010’s celebration unique, according to the editorial, is that it is celebrated at the historical juncture when the country is dedicated to repeating the double digit economic growth registered in the last six years. It then ends by calling on all participants to be part of this venture for growth and transformation.⁴⁶ This editorial makes history and public participation its central concerns to justify and legitimise the current regime. It draws on history to show that Irreecha is thriving now owing to the end of injustice and oppression, which this regime effected. Thus, the Oromo owe the state for the rejuvenation of the ritual that was once marginal. It calls for citizen participation as payback for the state’s relentless struggle to make forward-looking Oromia and Ethiopia a country with a sustainable economy. Thus, as one branch of the state, the media are also performing the task of breeding grateful, obedient and compliant citizens who unreservedly collaborate with the state.

In a news item published in Addis Zämän in 1988 EC under the heading ‘*yäIrreecha baäl takäbärä*’ (Irreecha was celebrated), the ritual is described in detail. In this article, significant coverage is given to environmental concerns raised in relation to Irreecha. The ritual performances at Hora Arsadi are said to endanger the wellbeing of the lake and its vicinity. To give weight to these concerns, an interview was conducted with the district’s natural resource and environment protection officer in order to get an expert’s point of view on the issue. The expert warns of the risk of pollution and the threats associated with fire that is lit to make coffee and burn incense. Slaughtering animals and smearing the lake with blood, throwing votive offerings like perfume, liquors and food items into the lake are also condemned. The expert adds that the danger is not only to the lake but also the town in general. As a solution to the problem, the expert suggests the preparation of an artificial lake and a space

people instead of using it to educate them and this ended radio programs about Irreecha until the change of government in 1991.

46 Milkaa’ina kabaja ayyaana irreechaaf. (2010). *Kallacha Oromiyaa*. 29 September, p. 1.

for offering. He also insists that this solution to the environmental concerns should not intervene in the religious practice and participants should not misunderstand the intention as something against Irreecha.⁴⁷ Although one cannot argue against the environmental concerns described by the official, covert attempts to vilify some ritual practices are evident in this piece. Intended or unintended, the article has contributed to validating the stance against rituals performed by some devotees who especially revere the spirits they believe to live inside the water and on the tree. The suggestion made by the expert is also an instance of misrecognition of the practitioners' perspective on the lake and its vicinity. The suggestion to build an artificial lake for offerings is incognisant of what the lake means to practitioners and the story of its becoming sacred. The expert did not look at the essence of the lake and hence suggests replacing it with an artificial body of water, although this is in contradiction to the popular belief that there is a spirit that lives in the lake. His view is a product of the belief that there is no spirit dwelling in the lake or the tree, an understanding of the ritual and the sacred site that very much stems from an approach that looks down on other traditions. In the way it rejects traditions as backward and less productive, it is similar to many newspaper articles published during the Därg regime, although there is different logic to justify the rejection. All demonstrate the spirit of their respective political atmospheres.

An interesting example of media representation and contestation based on political positions is witnessed in what happened following the incident of October 2016. What happened at Hora Arsadi and how it has been narrated in the media underscores the complex layers of politicised media representation of Irreecha. Government-owned media outlets like Fana Broadcasting and the Ethiopian national television station presented the issue as a stampede that occurred because some anti-peace and order forces intervened to abort the otherwise colourful and peaceful celebration and that led to the unforeseen atrocity. The government-owned media deflected the attention from government accountability by externalising the issue as something that had been orchestrated by diaspora-based opposition politicians who collaborate with countries like Eritrea and Egypt with the intention of destabilising Ethiopia. The state-run media presented the incident as a moment at which all the concerned citizens of Ethiopia had to collaborate, as they always do, to fight against external forces that are in the service of the country's historical enemies. In addition to questions of who should be held accountable for what happened on that day, the number of dead people and whether or not there were live bullets fired at participants were two more contested issues. All

47 yäIrreecha bäal tākäbärä. (1988 EC) *Addis Zimän*. Te'eq'emet 27. p. 5.

along, the state-run media were focused on protecting, if not consolidating, the image of the state, leaving aside the possible questions their representation of the incident could raise. While the media, as demonstrated by the examples here, serve as a mouthpiece of the state, advertisement⁴⁸ is also mobilised to present the state and its ideas, as some of the selected examples below show.

In addition to the role played by advertisements to attract more people to Hora Arsadi and Bishoftu city, there are billboards used to pass certain political messages. In these billboards the state is either presented as the guardian of traditions or there are messages that encourage citizens to be proactive in making change happen in the country.⁴⁹ Posted inside the city hall on the event of the panel discussion held on September 28, 2013, the banner below (figure 4.1) is in conversation with the theme of the panel discussion, which was on awareness creation about Irreecha. The text reads: 'Gochaawaan Aadaa keenyaa faalllessan dhabamsiisuun gahe hunda kenyaati' (taking actions against things that destroy our tradition's base is our responsibility). The main message of the slogan is that the Oromo should not tolerate any distortions directed against their tradition and it is their responsibility to dispute such discrediting actions. Irreecha's explicit mention is avoided, and instead it is referred to in general terms as 'tradition'. The image in the background of the text is of Irreecha with participants in traditional attire going to the lake.

The banner reproduced in figure 4.2 below was posted on the road that leads to a bazaar where a big open market was organised to exhibit products of small-scale industries and microfinance institutions in the context of the 2013 celebration. It reads 'Aadaa Boonsaafi Misooma Tuurizimii Keenya Biyya Misoomte Wajjin Dhaloota Dhufuuttu Dabarsuun Haaroomsa Biyya Keenyaa Haa Milkeenssinu' (Let us pass to the next generation our prideful tradition and developed tourism together with a developed country. Let us make sure

48 Prior to the industrial revolution, advertising had already become part of the economy as an element of public service that is involved in the task of creating persuasion. It was used as a channel of information to appeal to consumers' taste for a product or service (Williams 1980). Advertisement builds up brand, sells an idea, a personality, a product or a service. It is a process that strives to persuade a "target audience to take a predetermined course of action or adopt a certain attitude favourable to the advertiser" (Ukah 2006: p. 94). It is a new way of marketing and communication strategy that has been devised to reach the public with new ideas and inventions.

49 In Ethiopia, advertising grew spectacularly after 1991 following the change of state ideology to a more market-oriented one, which prepared the ground for an increasing number of advertising companies together with the culture of advertising different goods and services. The government is one of the largest beneficiaries of the mushrooming of this industry.



FIGURE 4.1 Banner inside the city hall of Bishoftu

PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR

our country is growing). The message on the banner pledges to pass on a better country to the next generation. A better country is assumed to be one that has a glamorous tradition, sustainable tourism and a sound economy. It requests that all promise to work towards the success of the renaissance project the country embarked on during the celebration of the millennium. The slogan envisages a better future that the coming generation will inherit, based on the labour of the current generation. This will materialise on the condition that all commit themselves to working hard for the fruition of the national development goals.

The banner depicted in figure 4.3 below is titled, 'Addan keenya guddina hawaas dinagdee keenyaaf ...' (our culture for our economy). It is hung on the fence of the city hall that is located next to the bus station in the centre of the city. The location where it is displayed is an area with active movement of people, making it visible to as many passers-by as possible. The banner is not decorated with accompanying pictures like the other ones. It is just plain text printed on a colourful background. The content of the slogan clearly created the connection between Irreecha and economic development for celebrants of 2013 to see.



FIGURE 4.2 Banner on the way to the trade fair
PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR

This tallies with what Abdulaziz Mohammad said at the 2008 celebration. He was then Vice President of the regional state. He said:

We have to promote our tradition. It has a big role to play in developing our economy. It introduces us to the rest of the world. It is a source of income and hence development. This tradition brings all the Oromo together from different places. Just like we are doing now, in the new millennium we have to join hands to promote and develop it.

Mohammad connected the tradition with the economy and requested that the participants care for and enhance the ritual not just because it introduces the Oromo to the rest of the world, but because it is also an important source of income. In line with this, it is important to note that the regional state is making efforts to have the ritual registered by UNESCO as part of the world's intangible cultural heritage.⁵⁰

Ethiopia has taken up the task of fostering what Mamdani (1996) calls “state nationalism” informed by development and transformation policies. This was

50 Mohamed Jilo. Interviewed by Serawit B. Debele. (24 October 2013).



FIGURE 4.3 Banner on the city hall's fence
PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR

more so during the tenure of the late Meles Zenawi. His developmentalist approach secured support by a certain section of the society for the promises it made to uplift the country from the yoke of poverty. In order to achieve the collective mentality that accepts the policies, different platforms were used to communicate messages that are believed to mobilise the nation. The sentiments generated in furtherance of the construction of the Great Renaissance Dam can be mentioned as a good example here in terms of its ability to mobilise the mass. Through reassuring messages, the advertisements are expected to invoke hope and inspiration. Politicians realise that 'rational' appeals undertaken in formal contexts are less moving than poignant ones in festive contexts. The above three banners are instances of attempts to invoke emotion tailored towards development. Together with the speeches, they are believed to stimulate participants through their emphasis on national pride, success, promises and hopes for a better future to come. Such advertisements are tactics of management as sources of inspiration for people who see them. Getting inspired by such advertisements encourages compliance and willing participation in what the state is doing.

In addition to the ones described above, four other institutions stand out as the main advertisers both on the eve and the day of the celebration.

These are DKT Ethiopia, Commercial Bank of Ethiopia, Oromia Association of Development and Rift Valley University College. Technically, these institutions have nothing to do with Irreecha, but are using the opportunity the ritual creates to promote their products to the participants. They have sponsored some of the events on the street, rented space to post banners or distributed pamphlets and postcards to promote their businesses and activities. And while these are the main institutions that have been significant in their audio-visual impact, there are also small-scale enterprises and music bands that have been actively promoting their businesses and offers for the day. As can be observed from the above description, the items, services and ideas being promoted resonate well with the state's agenda of poverty alleviation, transformation and development. Health, savings and education were advertised. Thus, the attempts at persuading the public through the advertisements are not in contradiction with the state's agenda. The problem however is that the promises made in such contexts, just like others made elsewhere, are progress-oriented and operate at the expense of blinding the public from historical injustices it suffered and its present destitute. They are futuristic in the sense that they merely reflect what Walter Benjamin (1968: p. 258) calls "politicians' stubborn faith in progress and their confidence in their 'mass basis'". Accordingly, the state ends up assigning certain "future oriented" tasks—that come in the languages of transformation, for the coming generation and etc.—with less to no relevance to their current socio-political and economic realities. They are always made to believe that the past has been the worst the present is much better and the future will be the best. It is the responsibility of the ruled to ensure that the future is arrived at by working hard. Complaining about the present is deemed illegitimate because compared to the past, the present could not have been any better. Progress and the hope it is imbued with then become the vocabulary through which the present is negotiated.

In Irreecha, the state presents itself as "simultaneously indistinguishable from society as the upholder of the law and keeper of the truth" (Mbembe 1992: p. 5). The state has domesticated Irreecha by reinventing it as a public holiday that capitalises on the existing robust social bond and resonance in the circle of participants. Irreecha can be seen as a space where loyalty, obedience and cooperation are cultivated.⁵¹ By performing intimacy, the state tries to affirm its authority, its magnificence and indispensability. Irreecha can thus be argued to be a site where the state attempts to foster a convivial relationship

51 This resonates to Eric Hobsbawm's (1983) discussion about the invention of traditions, where he asserts that states invent public celebrations, education and monuments to mobilise the population.

with its subjects. Seen from the perspective of the state, conviviality is a situation where there is a sense of collaboration and interdependence between the ruled and the ruler. Irreecha is a site where the state expects participants to echo the authority's visions and aspirations. Through Irreecha, the state shapes and controls narratives and discourses in its own interest and thereby yields consensus and imagines solidarity. It is a venue of creating sentiments that manage the populace into accepting themselves as part and parcel of what the state does, both as partakers and beneficiaries. By coopting Irreecha, the ruling party attempts to root itself in the Oromo nation for whose emancipation it claims to have paid the ultimate price. Irreecha is also a site where not only emancipatory politics by the state is affirmed but also a framework for the community is provided to imagine themselves as genuine beneficiaries of the emancipatory process and also part of the development and growth, as well as the state's commitment to fighting poverty. In the act of presenting itself as a provider, the state reduces citizens to subjects who have to be grateful that they are being looked after, that they are being led down the right track, that their dignity as a group has been restored. As a result, it is assumed that they have no reason to be frustrated or angry or raise questions or involve in alternative political practices that might restore their agency. Nor should they suggest alternative political thoughts that will bring about visible and concrete change in their lives. It is a signifier of Oromo unity that the people are unanimously marching under the leadership of the party against poverty in the country. It is the celebration of an imagined homogenous group, which supports or is assumed to support the state in its transformative endeavour to bring about development. It is a symbol of celebrating freedom that OPDO/EPRDF brought about. It is a symbol of the Oromo nation as it envisions a better future. The people's agency in political practices is stripped away and they are depicted as gullible and unreflective messengers who are fooled by others living in the comfort of foreign lands. In sum, by promoting Irreecha in connection with a state orchestrated version of Oromo national identity, the state downplays the much more complex structural social, political and economic demands into a matter of ethno-religious identity and shuns the possibility of other forms of political struggles and social movements which demand change.

In the context of Irreecha, politics as performed by the regional state of Oromia, and by extension the FDRE, is the act of instilling obedience whereby citizens are expected to conform unconditionally. As officials and authorities try to cultivate compliance,⁵² to make citizens adhere to the actions of the

52 Lisa Wedeen (1999) identifies three different kinds of compliance; a legitimate one that relies on consensus; a utilitarian one that relies on benefits; and a coercive one that is

state and participate in its activities voluntarily, they also use it to disparage the state's opponents as impotent, irrelevant and insignificant. The trajectory of Irreecha's appropriation by the regional state is a clear indication that the state's continuity is dependent on dispossessing its perceived or real competitors of power and cultivating obedience, which is obtained through the deployment of different forms of power. At one end there is the process of responsabilisation as well as deployment of discursive practices in which citizens are made part of what is going on in the country. At the other end, there is violence and coercion through which the state manifests its domination of the ruled.

6 Securitising the Ritual and Policing Bodies

Writing in the aftermath of the deaths that occurred at Irreecha 2016, Buli Ejeta⁵³ comparatively describes the 'peaceful' atmosphere of the celebrations in the last decades as follows:

An amazing part of the *Irreecha* ceremony is its absolute orderliness, the reigning of absolute peaceful aura, the showering of love and mutual respect, the sense of oneness and unity. In all the *Irreecha* ceremonies recorded over the last two decades, are its first rejuvenation, there has never been a single stampede or injury recorded. It is hard to imagine how this is possible when as many people as four million (on average) come together at one place. One can be reminded of all the stampedes that happen every year in our planet among the gatherings of people much less in number [...] Until Sunday Oct. 2, 2016, the existence of this absolute peace and tranquility has made the ever-presence of heavily armed security personals [*sic*] that have been persistently deployed by the government so irrelevant. Their role was totally meaningless since there was no case that calls for their involvement. People have got their own means to contain any shortfall if ever existed. The reason for such absolute peace and tranquility is mutual respect, love and obedience to the principle of peace in the Oromo social philosophy (2016: p. 15).

based on violence that is deployed by the powerful. At one time or another, politicians resort to one of the three or all as an act of managing.

53 Buli Edjeta Jobir. (2016) Into the heart of Irreecha. *Addis Standard*, October, p. 14.

Nevertheless, I have had several encounters and conversations that were striking enough to make me raise certain questions related to the operation of security at Hora Arsadi. In the afternoon of October 5, 2014, I went to the police station because I was asked by an officer to report to him. I arrived there late in the afternoon after the end of the ceremony. On my arrival, the compound of the police station was filled with young females and males dressed in various Oromo traditional attire. The girls were crying. I approached one of them and asked what was going on. She told me her friends were detained by the police. I asked her what they did and she said the police caught them while buying some books. I walked close to the detainees and started listening to their conversation with the police. One of the detainees said, "But we bought the books not knowing the contents". The police answered, "How can you decide to buy a book without knowing the content? Shouldn't you open and see before you buy?" One detainee replied, "But we thought they are all right as they were being sold on the street". The police caught them because they were buying books on the street. However, at least on that day, there was neither a clear declaration notifying people of which books were 'legitimate', nor were the sellers stopped from displaying the books. The incident I witnessed is part of an ongoing trend that has already gone on for years. It is also complemented by reports from Human Rights Watch in which accounts of artists and writers who have been detained on the occasion of Irreecha are shared. Most of those who shared their stories were detained and arrested for either having sold their products or bought certain goods. In the 2014 report, a story of an author was put as follows. In 2011 "after selling copies of his second book at the Irreechaa festival in Debre Zeit, he was arrested and arbitrarily detained for two months on the accusation he had been attempting to incite people against the government" (Amnesty International 2014: p. 45).⁵⁴

The question, therefore, is whether peace and tranquility have been the typical character of the celebration and whether or not the security forces were really irrelevant until then. If not, then what were the manifestations of the presence of the security apparatus? The answers are sought by delving into experiences of participants whose encounters with state security bring in different dimensions that might challenge Buli's statement about the absolute orderliness of the 2016 celebration and the years before.

54 Amnesty International. (2014) BECAUSE I AM AN OROMO: Sweeping Repression in the Oromia Region of Ethiopia. [Online] Available from: <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/4000/afr250062014en.pdf> [Accessed 15 June 2015].

Referring to the situation in the early 1990s, Kebede, an elderly Oromo who witnessed the celebration during the three regimes, comments that Hora Arsadi has become a place where people are harassed and even killed by the police and military forces. In a rather inquisitive tone, he reflects, “I wonder how many people ‘Ihadig’ [EPRDF] killed here”.⁵⁵ Kebede’s eyewitness account is supported by reports in different newspapers. For instance, the 1987 EC publications of *Tarik* and *Andebet* newspapers report the death of participants who were found to be guilty of criticising Meles Zenawi, the then-President of the transitional government, while praising Mengistu Hailemariam, the leader who was deposed in 1991.⁵⁶ For Alemu, this violence was experienced because “those political groups did not understand the true essence of Irreecha. Irreecha is an event for people to meet to reconcile, hold hands and pray together for peace and development; it is not an occasion for people to fight”. To solve this problem, the deployment of tight security is pertinent since Irreecha is a ritual in which two to three million people participate.⁵⁷ Moreover, Alemu asks:

What else are the security forces supposed to do if they do not facilitate the peaceful ending of the celebration? Remember, especially now, the Horn region is becoming sensitive in relation to terrorist attacks. Unless attention is given to peace and security, we do not have any guarantee that something might not happen. Therefore, it is hard not to have security forces present at the event of Irreecha when millions of citizens are flocking there. They have to make sure that the people come and go peacefully.⁵⁸

Connecting the ritual to global developments regarding terrorist acts, Alemu implies that Irreecha could be a hub of terrorists that could wreak havoc on the celebrants and the country in general unless it is well managed. In this way, the official at RSCTB attempts to justify the heavy presence of security forces. In fact, as long as Irreecha continues to be regarded as a rallying point for the opposition and especially for OLF, it makes sense that the state is cautious about the security. Since OLF had been labelled a terrorist party as per the 2009 anti-terrorist law until the 2018 reforms,⁵⁹ it is logical for the authorities to assume Irreecha could nurture terrorists and acts of terrorism. Officials like

55 Kebede Tikse. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (16 March 2013).

56 yäMeles Zenawi Zämän. (1987 EC) *Tarik*, Te’eqemet 1. p. 1. President Melesn yäsädäbu tägädälu. (1987 EC) *Andebet*, 28 Mäskäräm, p. 1.

57 Alemu Serbesa. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (22 November 2013).

58 Alemu Serbesa. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (22 November 2013).

59 For more on this, see <http://www.refworld.org/docid/4ba799d32.html>.

Caalaa further explain the issue, saying that the security forces are assigned on the event to avoid hassles the people may create to affect the smooth flow of the ceremony.⁶⁰

Mobilising certain categories like terrorist attacks and the fear that comes with them rightfully justifies the presence of heavily armed soldiers apart from the regional state's police forces. This is mainly because it bestows the task of protecting citizens on the security apparatus, and rightfully so. But even if this is a commendable act by the state, there is more to securitisation as has been gathered from the archives, interviews, personal observations and conversations. As much as it is for keeping the peace and security, and by extension protecting the safety of participants, it is also about sustaining the monopoly of coercion by controlling a site which is threatened by forces that destabilise the state apparatus. Thus, much as it is for keeping peace, it is also about—to use Bourdieu's (1994: p. 5) phrase—"dispossessing [the state's] domestic competitors of instruments of physical violence and of the right to use them" and the invocation of OLF and its presence at Hora Arsadi attests to this move by the state. Securitisation, as a process that involves the army is not meant for protecting the participants from harassment, theft and petty crimes. This is the task of the police forces. It is rather a campaign to control OLF's insurgency. Diribi, like many others, argues that the government initially attempted to halt Irreecha by different means that would discourage the populace from coming. Since the government was not able to stop Irreecha and the influx of Oromo youth, the regional state created a means to control it, and securitising the area is resorted to as a mechanism of management.⁶¹

Back in the early 2000s, police forces only stood at some strategic spots to search participants and confiscate OLF flags, banners and other symbolic expressions. The security is already notified about which emblems are permitted. This helps to rule out OLF-related emblems or flags.⁶² Accordingly, the faji Oromo, which means the flag of the Gada, having the colours of black, red and white from top to bottom, is the only accepted symbol in addition to flags of the regional state as well as the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.⁶³ Based on this framework, the security forces make sure that there are no other symbols that are used by participants. If anyone is caught with such symbols, it is likely that they will be detained and interrogated by the police. People, particularly the youth, have been arrested for wearing red and green colours,

60 Caalaa Sori. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (27 November 2013).

61 Diribi Demissie. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (20 October 2013).

62 Sisay Atomsa. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (5 September 2013).

63 Alemu Serbesa. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (22 November 2013).

which are identified as symbols of OLF, much as others were jailed for singing songs that were regarded as critical of the government. Sisay Atomsa, a member of MTA and later OLF, shared his experience of carrying the emblem of OLF during one of the celebrations. He stated that he was pulled out of the public transport he took to travel to Bishoftu for the celebration because of the banner. He was finally released with a warning but his OLF emblem was confiscated.⁶⁴ The Human Rights Watch reports similar encounters as follows:

Some students wore their traditional clothes to express their culture. The authorities said that we were expressing a political opinion. Eleven of us were arrested and detained at the police station for five days, beaten and interrogated. They asked us which political organization was behind us, who we were supporting. They said I was opposing the government and was inciting the other students against the government.

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL 2014: p. 44⁶⁵

Gradually, according to Dereje, himself a police officer, as the government officials started being part of the celebration, security took a more stringent form.⁶⁶ The excessive deployment of security is perceived by others as a force that threatens the youth for their political stance, which is mostly expressed through their protest songs and banners.⁶⁷ Dandi narrates his eyewitness account of the relationship between security forces and participants as follows:

For more than ten years, what happens is that the government security forces drag people here and there and bother them. One cannot of course deny that many people go [to the event] for political reasons rather than religious ones. Some support the system; some criticise the system, and this happens at the Irreecha celebration as a result of which the government is alarmed. However, even if participants do that, as long as they are not involved in violent acts, people should be left alone to celebrate the ritual without being terrorised.⁶⁸

64 Sisay Atomsa. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (5 September 2013). Field notes from September 2013 and October 2014.

65 Amnesty International. (2014) BECAUSE I AM AN OROMO: Sweeping Repression in the Oromia Region of Ethiopia. [Online] Available from: <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/4000/afr250062014en.pdf> [Accessed 15 June 2015].

66 Dereje Gemed. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (13 September 2013).

67 Dereje Gemed. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (13 September 2013).

68 Dandi Negewo. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (5 October 2013).

The security forces are involved in forceful acts like beating and detaining perceived or real protesters, political agitators or activists.⁶⁹ According to Biru, it is commonplace that many Oromo youth are beaten, arrested and harassed. At some point, “the Aba Gadas had to intervene to stop the police that were harassing the children”.⁷⁰ In 2012, for instance, Human Rights Watch reported the arrest of two hundred Oromo youth during the celebration of Irreecha at Hora Arsadi.⁷¹ Reflecting on the impact of the tightened security, Alemu admits that there are occasional cases of police harassment. He continues that in his capacity as a member of ORSCTB, he has “stopped a police [officer] who was beating participants amidst the celebration. This is something that can happen anywhere and we should not make a fuss due to such minor incidents”.⁷²

In the ways described above, the security forces enter into the details of the celebration and engage in acts of supervising movements, performances and ‘abnormal’ practices. This way, they formalise and justify punishment. Although the way they deal with the scenario is specific to them, as a mechanism of disciplining, their actions constitute the multiplicity of state intervention to manage the ritual. The police and the federal army exercise their power by punishing participants, an act which is a manifestation of state power. Notwithstanding promises made by the government that the era of beating and torturing has passed, corporal punishment and detention are banal at the celebration. The implications drawn from the acts of beating and arresting a single participant do not stop at the moment they happen at Hora Arsadi, but rather send a warning to others that if they do not behave in accordance with standards within the context of the celebration, their fate will not be different. In such a way, the state uses Irreecha to produce docile bodies through subtle and at times explicit acts of disciplining.⁷³ It also uses coercive power to condition the youth into a collective mentality of obedience to the status quo.

The increased politicisation of Irreecha made it inevitable for the state to unveil its muscle by deploying its security forces, who employ various forms of violence. Understanding the investment of violence within the state framework takes into account its relation to law. The state is also responsible for keeping peace and order within the legal framework it provides to administer

69 For detail see <http://gadaa.com/oduu/16209/2012/10/02/all-oromo-nationals-arrested-on-irreecha-carnival-should-be-released-immediately/>.

70 Aba Sena Biru Tsegaye. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (28 January 2013).

71 Amnesty International. (2014) BECAUSE I AM AN OROMO: Sweeping Repression in the Oromia Region of Ethiopia. [Online] Available from: <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/4000/afr250062014en.pdf> [Accessed 15 June 2015].

72 Alemu Serbesa. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (22 November 2013).

73 Michel Foucault. (1975) Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison.

its population. In such situations, violence is used as a means to protect the country from things like terrorist attacks, and this is the legal duty of the security apparatus. Thus, in the event of the celebration, violence is used to guarantee a degree of public safety, which events like Irreecha require as they attract a large number of participants. However, violence is equally deployed to contravene laws by the law-making bodies themselves.⁷⁴ For instance, some of the acts carried out by the police or army officials run against the constitutional provision on rights and freedoms. A simple example is the story of purchasing a book that was displayed on the street along the way to the lake. It is not law that governs a state of exception that seems to rule here, justifying the violation of laws.

The heavy-handedness of the security forces at Hora Arsadi during Irreecha 2016 is a manifestation of the fact that sovereignty is sustained on the condition that the state exercises the right to kill, the right to decide who is to live and under what circumstance (more on Irreecha 2016 in chapter 5). If to live means to survive, survival in a prison, in exile or at home is determined by the state's commitment to protect its sovereignty and deploy violence for its own sake. As much as this action by the regime exposes its urge to maintain power for as long as possible, death at Irreecha is also a showcase of how much (or how little) citizens matter, or even more, what citizenship in the Ethiopian context means and who is entitled to exercise the rights associated with it. The state uses its right to kill to maintain its sovereignty by first employing certain dehumanising categories like 'anti peace and stability forces'. Subjects are simply reduced to numbers and referred to as "a few individuals with hidden political agendas to destabilise the country in connection with foreign enemies like Egypt and Eritrea" in the case of the 2016 deaths, for instance. The incident and the death toll was blamed on these 'destabilising' forces and a stampede that resulted from the trampling on one another when people attempted to run away from the effects of the teargas.⁷⁵ The deployment of violence is justified as long as terms like terrorism and national security are mobilised, because these categories embody a state of exception which entails the conception that reduces participants to inconsequential 'bare life,' which

74 Walter Benjamin. (2007) *Critique of Violence*. Benjamin deliberates on the relationship between law and violence distinguishing between law making and law preserving violence as well as their relations with the state, the ruled and power.

75 In the evening of October 2016 the then Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn gave a media briefing on the Ethiopia Broadcasting Corporation (henceforth EBC), where he blamed it all on external forces and expressed his appreciation for keeping peace and order, two empty signifiers used to describe a situation of utter instability and disorder. A week later, on October 9, 2016, Ethiopia declared a six-month state of emergency.

is disposable in the interest of state sovereignty. In this instance, the making of the state is predicated on the citizens' killability, where dispossessing life becomes the norm.⁷⁶ Power for the state then becomes creating and appealing to "exception, emergency, and a fictionalised notion of the enemy." (Mbembe 2003: p. 16).

If we go by Bakhtin's (1984: p. 89) conception of feast, ideally it means liberation. It is a moment when 'ephemeral freedom' reigns and it is marked by "a temporary suspension of the entire official system with all its prohibitions and hierarchic barriers. For a short time life came out of its usual, legalized and consecrated furrows and entered the sphere of utopian freedom". James Scott agrees with ritual's permissiveness to "certain things to be said, certain forms of social power to be exercised that are muted or suppressed outside this ritual sphere [and h]ardly any pretension to superior status-legal knowledge, title, classical learning, high tastes, military prowess, or property-went unscathed by the leveling techniques of carnival" (1990: pp. 173–4). While this is agreeable in most cases, I share Schielke's (2012) misgivings about the manner in which festivities are idealised as sites of ultimate freedom, where people transcend from the ordinary to the utopian experience or to a "better world", as Schielke calls it. The consistent state presence through the security apparatus is one possible constraint that comes in the way of transiting to the 'ideal' world in the performance of festive events like Irreecha. Thus, it cannot be taken for granted that there is a suspension of the entire official system. Disruption of the utopian freedom is already always implicated in festivities once they become the purview of the state as much as they are of the ordinary participants. Where there is the state, there is less possibility to do away with hierarchies, unless through subversion, for which feasts are also a fertile ground and hence their perpetual ambivalence. The next chapter takes up this perspective on politics and delves into politics of rupture, a moment manifest when subjects begin to distance themselves, raising critical questions and seeking alternatives. Since the people are central, their responses, be they in the form of compliance, conformity, disobedience or resistance, are political and hence vital to our understanding of political processes as reflected at the celebration of Irreecha. Above all, we will see that in the same process of state consolidation which we saw above, the state works towards its own unmaking because the violent encounter forms subjectivities whose life becomes about taking risks in the act of trying to reclaim dignity. This creates conditions in which they will do whatever it takes to challenge the structure of power that regards them as disposable.

⁷⁶ Giorgio Agamben. (1998) *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*.

Displacing the State

As shown in the previous chapter, the ritual has become a site of political performance by the state, a venue where state power with its myriad faces is manifested in a spectacular manner. But in these same acts of extravaganza, the state has been creating the conditions for its own displacement. This is so because the state makes possible a process by which political subjectivities that are prepared to take risks are conceived, for example, against its excessive deployment of violence. This in turn makes Irreecha a setting for collective struggle, which invests people with meaning grounded in a sense of shared identity in which, *inter alia*, ambivalent political thoughts and practices are engendered. In this chapter, politics from below is explored by delving further into practices of dissidence, where the ruled resolutely express the will not to be governed, to use a Foucauldian formulation. Dissent politics in these moments is informed by experiences with and representations of the state in the popular imagination and lived realities of the ruled. Ordinary segments of the Oromo, particularly the youth and opposition politicians, appropriate Irreecha as yet another platform to pose questions pertaining to the current political order, and thereby confront the state using various mediums, media outlets and vocabularies such as bodily decorations and folksongs. By paying attention to the nitty-gritty of the ritual as a productive spectrum, I set out to assess how the subordinated make sense of their lives as they challenge and upset the existing structure of power. I assert that the ritual is irreducible to a mere display of power instrumentalised by the state, but is also an occasion on which social movements that move away from and/or incorporate elite-orchestrated politics take place.

1 Between Party Politics and Popular Struggle

1.1 “*Irreecha Smelt like OLF*”: the 1990s

The change of regime in 1991 brought OLF much closer to the grassroots Oromo than before because it opened the political space that was not available to opposition groups under the military regime. Freedom of expression and media also further accelerated OLF’s accessibility as much as the leaders’ efforts to use public gatherings like Irreecha to reach out to their supporters. For instance, in September 1991 a few members of the OLF along with a group

of musicians and performers went to take part in the Irreecha celebration.¹ On this occasion, prominent figures such as the leadership of OLF and some members of the OPDO were present at Hora Arsadi.² Popular artists and journalists like the painter Lemma Guya, journalist Kuma Idea, and Laureate Tsegaye Gebremedihnn were also part of the event. Irreecha during this time was part of the joyous moment, celebrating the new hope and inspiration that the change in May 1991 brought with it. Songs were sung and prayers were said alluding to the end of the civil war and a new beginning. The spirit of the songs and prayers was informed by jubilation following the overthrow of the military regime and expectations from the many promises made by the transitional government, filling participants with hope. People were delighted and sang “yaa Oromoo gamadii gizeen keeti”, meaning, “Be happy Oromo, your time has come”.³ Some were mocking the fact that President Mengistu ran away from the country after promising he would fight the ‘rebels’ to the end. “Ya Mangistuu akasummati nugattee deemte” (You Mengistu, you just abandoned us and ran away). Elderly women were singing prayer songs where they stressed that, according to a long-time participant Telile, they

... are celebrating what our forefathers and fathers used to celebrate. Their prayer is what kept us all safe; their prayer guarded the soldiers who protect the sovereignty of the country. There is nothing else apart from doing what our ancestors did in the past. We pray to thank the creator because of whose mercy our children spend a blessed day and come home safely, we get enough rain, we grow enough food, we pray to the creator about our country, our cattle. We say to the creator, please, have mercy on us and we also make a vow. I remember we came here once to pray as we were frustrated due to lack of rain. Our prayer was answered, we harvested enough food and our country became stable.⁴

The youth welcomed OLF in anticipation of what the future holds. Their songs primarily revolved around the theme of unity of the Oromo people. They expressed sentiments of be/longing and how much they have been waiting for OLF and how much they count on the party as the only hope for the Oromo

1 Angatu Tadese. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (16 February 2017). Angatu was one of the youngest members of the music group and went to Hora Arsadi as a vocalist.

2 Kuma Idea. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (20 November 2013).

3 Angatu Tadese. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (16 February 2017).

4 Telile Dhaba. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (16 February 2012).

people. Below is one couplet from the various folksongs calling upon OLF as their deliverer and anticipating the coming of better days for the Oromo.

Oo garmaamekaa Oromoon walwaameka	The Oromo called each other, they summoned
Oo garmaamekaa Oromoon walwaameka	The Oromo called each other, they summoned
Oo korma guduruu Oromoon leencuma duruu	Bulls of guduruu, the Oromo are always lions
Oo korma guduruu ABOn keenyuma duruu	Bulls of guduruu, OLF has always been ours

This piece carries the message of preparedness to move forward under the leadership of OLF. In the song they are expressing that the Oromo are fearless, energetic and strong promising their readiness to join the OLF.

Despite the general celebratory mood that bathed the country as mirrored by Irreecha, Ethiopian politics experienced a milestone event in 1992 when the OLF removed itself from the transitional government, abandoned its twelve seats in the parliament and resorted to armed struggle. Curiously, this seems to have been foretold by the Oromo elders, who predicted that the coming years might not be full of positive prospects for Oromo politics. Their prophecy was based on what happened during one of the Irreecha celebrations. Six bulls were bought to slaughter for the feast. While the bulls were being led towards the lake, one of them fell down and died instantly. There was consternation in the crowd, particularly among the elders who were bewildered by the incident, for they know what the implication might be. They decided to slaughter the remaining bulls and read the peritoneum to find out what the years ahead held for the Oromo.⁵ The ritual elders informed the politicians that the times ahead were going to be full of obstacles, and even more so for the Oromo.⁶ A few months later, the OLF announced its withdrawal.⁷ The years following the withdrawal of the OLF were years full of tension as far as open Oromo political movements within the country were concerned. The OLF was shunned from the political landscape as the ruling party presented it as the enemy and hence also a source of disunity due to its alleged divisive ideologies. OLF's politics was reduced to the question of secession and it also got represented as a 'narrow

5 In the Oromo tradition, it is common that the peritoneum is read to predict the future and be prepared, for better or worse, according to the results of the prognostication. De Salviac discusses this in his account of the Oromo religious traditions (De Salviac 1901).

6 Kuma Idea. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (20 November 2013).

7 For more on this, see Edmund Keller (1995).

nationalist' party with no political ambitions beyond the interest of the people it claimed to represent.⁸ Given that the OLF had now resorted to armed struggle, all the popular support was mobilised clandestinely.⁹ This was mainly because people were afraid of being thrown to jail if they were suspected to have any connections with the then criminalised party. Any link or suspicion thereof was regarded as a political threat to the transitional government and a danger to the unity and stability to which the country was just transitioning. Once again, this resulted in the shattering of rallying points for contact with the public. In the face of the dwindling of its public presence, Hora Arsadi's political significance for the OLF continued to grow with time, as did Irreecha's association with OLF in the popular imagination and in the eyes of the state.¹⁰

For instance, the video footage of the 1993 Irreecha celebration, which I accessed from the ERTA, reflected a visible OLF presence at the event. I observed that the lake area was decorated with OLF flags hanging on the trees. People were singing songs in small circles, criticising the current state of affairs and expressing their disappointment after OLF left the country's political scene. Songs that were critical of the transitional government began to be heard. For instance, Meles Zenawi (then President of the transitional government) was criticised for sidelining OLF. The singing youth compared Meles Zenawi to Mengistu Hailemariam, the dictator who left the country for Zimbabwe towards the end of the civil war, as can be read in the couplets below:

Yaa muraa maqasii hin taane yaa	Oh Meles how similar you are with
Mallasii	your predecessor
Faana Mangistuu qabachuu deemta	Your fate is going to be the same as
atisii	Mengistu
Barri taruman dema silaa yaa	Wäyanés it's a matter of taking turns
Wayyanee	anyway
Ka'i Oromoo duriyeen maf si mootii	You Oromo, stand up! why are you
	ruled by a vulgar
Hin kenniin kilashii qotiyo keeniti	Leave your oxen, pick up your
	klashnikov

Given that the context of the celebration was a time when OLF had decided to pick up arms, this song responds to the call and is an attempt to motivate

8 Diribi Demissie. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (20 October 2013).

9 The time of OLF's armed struggle could be dubbed as one of the murky chapters of the country's history, particularly in relation to inter-ethnic violence and animosity, which needs serious research.

10 Belay Shiferaw. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (20 November 2013).

the Oromo to continue supporting OLF asking participants to abandon farming, as captured in the phrase “Leave your oxen” and join the armed struggle. According to the above couplet, there is nothing encouraging that has come out of Meles’ administration so far; he was not good enough, let alone better than the previous ruler. The participants had already started conveying messages of caution to the regime. By mentioning Meles Zenawi together with the party TPLF/Wäyané they were extending their criticism to the federal state, which is the centre of all political powers. They used comparative terms to ask what the current regime had brought for them, to question how much, if at all, the current rule is different from the military junta that came before revealing their cynicism. They also gave an ultimatum, saying that if it did not better itself before it was too late, the regime’s fate was not going to be different from that of the military regime. It would not be long before it would become the victim of a disgraceful deposition. Through such songs filled with scepticism, they express their lack of confidence and trust. They point out that there is a deep-seated political problem that must be addressed lest the regime fall apart. The underlying connotation of the songs imagines a better future for an independent Oromia to come, and OLF features strongly as the rescuer in the popular imagination.

The call in the songs where participants are encouraged to leave their farms behind and join the struggle was not without its own effects. The life of Sisay Atomasa, one of my key interlocutors, is proof that Irreecha’s use as a site to recruit fighters for OLF had actually borne some fruit. Sisay decided to join the party and served as a foot soldier for a few years until he gave up hope on OLF and returned to Addis Ababa to continue running a small business in the media industry. He told me that he was determined to fight and overthrow the ‘Wäyané’ and be part of the victory the Oromo deserved to see. However, he said:

At some point, OLF completely abandoned us in the desert and some forgot us in the comfort of their lives in the USA and Europe. The government, on the other hand, was tough, as you might have heard on the news. That was the point at which I felt let down by the party to which I had dedicated my life. I did not see the point of staying there and dying in vain. After I returned, life has not been easy because I have been arrested and interrogated numerous times until they [the government] gave up on me.¹¹

11 Sisay Atomasa. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (5 September 2013). In 2015 I learnt that Sisay was arrested again during the course of Oromo protests in 2014, but no one knows his whereabouts except that he was taken from his residence by the police.

In other songs like the one below, protesters demand that TPLF stop 'looting Ethiopia' and leave the country.

Itophiyaa saamaa jirtuu	you are looting Ethiopia
Gaariishee mara guurrattan	you are taking all the goodies to your country
Iddo dhuftanitti deebi'a	leave the country and go back to where you belong

Such articulations in the songs are reflections and reproductions of stereotypes that emerged from the propaganda propagated by the Därg during the civil war. Members of TPLF were depicted as bandits, rebels and anti-unity, none of which were the character of 'true' Ethiopians, according to the Därg. The socio-political and historical formation of the youth who say these things are reflective of a generation that dehumanised TPLF and disregarded it as not belonging to Ethiopia because it promoted divisive politics that compromised the unity of the country. As expressions like "looting Ethiopia" and "go back to your country" intimate, there is an otherness ascribed to TPLF and its supporters by people in the centre. They are represented as an anomaly to the popular imagination of the time that regarded Ethiopian unity the ultimate good based on which other political outlooks were demonised. But this representation leaves Ethiopia as the centre and takes up a narrower version when the Oromo youth at Irreecha gradually began to focus on the Oromo in relation to the TPLF despite that TPLF remains to be the 'enemy'. Animosity narrows its focus from a strictly Ethiopia-centric viewpoint to later on a rearticulation of TPLF in relation to Oromia. This is also a reflection of how the nationalist sentiments and sense of belonging shifted from Ethiopian identification to ethnic specific versions with the surfacing of ethnic identity as the main umbrella. The following is an example of songs where the youth engage the idea of self-rule in a manner that mirrors the public discourse in Oromia region where OPDO is perceived as the ultimate tool for the TPLF.

Oromoon qeerrensa Tigreen leencaa	Tigre is lion, Oromo is tiger
Kamtu walirraa dheechaa?	Which one will first surrender?
Dinne ormaa hin taanu jalee	We refuse to be under others
Ofumaaf wal bulchina malee	We'd rather rule ourselves
Yaa of wallaaltuu yartuu	You wicked ones who do not know yourselves
Maal barbaadaf Oromootti galtuu?	Why are you coming to the Oromo?
DH.D.U.O ati badduu dha dhibaayaa	OPDO, you the despicable bastard

As tiger and lion, the singers are hinting that both groups are in a similar power position, in which case neither should be subordinated. As such, they are questioning the efficiency of the OPDO as rulers because they were regarded as TPLF's impositions. This was also a response to those who accused the youth of being lazy and unproductive. They responded to that by directing their criticism to the structural failures which are not addressing major political, social and economic demands. They use words like wicked and bastard to describe the officials, implying that they are either malicious or incapable of ruling the country. Moreover, they are also concerned about self-rule engaging the idea of freedom by encouraging the listeners to rethink the reasons that the Oromo are denied self-rule. This is a clear indication that they do not count the OPDO as genuinely Oromo. They are reflecting the widely held perception that OPDO is a brain-child and proxy of TPLF that has always been loyal to its 'masters' but not the Oromo people. In the first few years, OPDO was not one of the main actors in the political contestations the youth invoked in their singing. OPDO, as a young party that was new to many people at the time, has not featured as much as OLF and TPLF in the songs. The criticisms were mainly directed towards TPLF and its chairperson Meles Zenawi. Gradually, however, the OPDO started to emerge as an object of bashing and dismissal as inept. The OPDO was rejected for being a puppet, which the Oromo do not deserve. Its claim of representing the Oromo people was rejected.

The state's perception of Irreecha as a site that cultivated OLF oriented politics that ordinary participants of the ritual articulated in songs and decoration had already begun translating into some action. There were violent encounters where some participants were killed, as reported by an Amharic weekly newspaper known as *Tarik*. According to the reportage, the 1993 celebration was dominated by protest songs to the extent that it looked more like a demonstration than a religious festival. In the paper it is written that "Irreecha looked like a protest called in the city of Debre Zeit against Meles and his administration."¹² Apart from the songs, the traditional attire the youth put on sends a message to the regional state that they are supporting OLF. Girls decorate themselves with Oromo traditional regalia in the colours of the OLF flag. Beads were used to make different accessories such as bracelets, earrings, headbands that are arranged in a way that resembles the OLF flag, and in such a way they make political statements that frustrate state officials, who can only resort to a violent crackdown through the army and police. Male participants also dress in clothes showing the flag or with symbols like sceptres that appropriate OLF's colours. Thus, participants' bodies became important sites of

12 yäMeles Zenawi Zämän. (1987 EC) *Tarik*, Te'eq'emet 1, p. 1. President Melesn yäsädäbu tägädälu. (1987 EC) *Adebet*, 28 Mäskäräm, p. 1.

resistance that upset the existing political order while at the same time expressing aspirations oriented in accordance with the OLF.

Just as much as the state was alarmed by Irreecha's association with the OLF, ordinary youth were increasingly attracted to the ritual for the same reason. When I met Degefa in 2013, one of the questions I raised to him was what he thinks makes participation in Irreecha so compelling for both the urban and rural youth. "For many young Oromo who go to Bishoftu for Irreecha," opined the coordinator of the Bole Biftu Afan Oromo evangelical church:

Irreecha became attractive and a source of curiosity not necessarily for its spiritual value but for its political value and its association with Oromo national identity. Some consider Irreecha as a place where they meet OLF. They also seek unity and solidarity with fellow Oromo coming from other places. I can confidently say this particularly about evangelical Oromo who are taught to reject any connection with such religious practices. Nothing else could explain their persistence in going to the place except their fascination with the newly found symbol of national identity and the OLF, which most of them grew up hearing about from their parents.¹³

Emphasising Irreecha's association with the OLF, Sisay Atomsa similarly shares his opinion "Irreecha at Hora Arsadi smelt like OLF". His coinage is based on his observation of the changes up until he finally left for the front, joining the OLF. While recounting his role in decorating the lake area, Sisay says, "As the organiser of the event, MTA invested in the items bought to beautify the site. I have seen that anything that reflected the OLF was preferred to other symbols".¹⁴ And yet, one of the board members of MTA at the time, Feyissa Beyene, opined that the MTA did not set out to openly endorse and publicise OLF's ideology on the occasion of the celebration. Nevertheless, he also admitted that there has been a pronounced presence of OLF at Hora Arsadi and nobody from MTA ever tried to stop or control that.¹⁵ The same was true with Dirbi, the chairperson of the MTA. These two members of the MTA leadership

13 Degefa Sime. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (17 January 2013). Degeffa made the above comment when I asked him about what attracts Pentecostal Oromos in the face of a strong opposition coming from the church against the ritual. He believes the youth are attracted to Irreecha for its association with OLF.

14 Sisay Atomsa. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (5 September 2013).

15 Feyissa Beyene. Interviewed by: Serawit B. Debele. (22 November 2013). Looking at Feyissa's political persuasion, although he did not say this to me for obvious reasons, it is clear that he is a member of OLF. I was able to tell from our conversations where he stood with regard to the Oromo question.

and Sisay, who was in the youth wing of the association, had a clear commitment to OLF's ideology as the source of the solution for the Oromo predicament. Thus, if MTA invested in banners and flags that represented OLF, and if the association's leadership was rather sympathetic towards the OLF, then there is a discernible link between MTA and OLF, confirming the assumption that the association has indeed created a platform for the OLF at Hora Arsadi.

While MTA's leadership did not openly acknowledge that they endorsed the OLF at Irreecha, their ideological inclinations and the directions of their political struggle meet, since both accentuate the question of Oromo unity and the struggle for self-determination. As stressed in the second chapter, the annual magazine MTA distributes was instrumental in circulating certain political ideas ranging between the fact that the Oromo should liberate themselves from Ethiopian colonialism to proudly endorsing their roots as a source of emancipation. In one of the magazines (Waaqeffanna 2003) there is a piece which explicitly states that one of the main objectives of the MTA is to struggle for self-determination and create platforms where Oromo can get together ^{of} deliberate on such ideas. So, it is not a coincidence that OLF had a platform at Irreecha during the time of MTA's patronage. After all, according to Mohammed (1998), it was the card-carrying members of the old MTA that eventually became members of the OLF that was established in 1974. The newly reinstated MTA proudly associates itself with both the OLF and the historical MTA, giving the impression that the two have the same agenda in struggling for the Oromo cause. What encouraged this link and the facilitation of Irreecha as an alternative site of political engagement can only be understood by looking at these historical and ideological links and the claims made based on them. On top of the ethno-nationalist inclinations of the reinstated MTA and its dedication to organising platforms that unite the Oromo and enable them to address their political issues, it is possible that they are keen to create the space whenever and wherever possible for the Oromo to be in touch with the OLF, the party they believe is right to address the Oromo political question. Therefore, in the face of meagre political space in Ethiopia ^{that} entertains ^{opposition} views, Irreecha's appropriation by the MTA had become a blessing for OLF, as it facilitated the creation of an alternative political forum. OLF's presence was received with open public support manifested through the songs, clothes, bodily decorations and speeches. It then became common knowledge to the extent that, for most including the authorities, Irreecha is nothing but an OLF rallying point. Government officials knew about this connection, as did ordinary participants. Therefore it is safe to conclude that there was more room in Irreecha for OLF than there was for OPDO or any other political group, at least for as long as the ritual was under MTA's custody.

Irreecha developed into a counter public where alternative voices to the state orchestrated political ideologies were flourishing. The ritual emerged as an arena of politics that countered the existing political arrangement which, for the Oromo, has been consistently marginalising. Subversive discourses that stand against what the state promotes flourished at Hora Arsadi. Ordinary participants who accentuated the ideologies of OLF contested the state's legitimacy. Going along with Asad's conception of the public sphere as a site inhabited by "embodied subjects for whom politics and 'religion' cannot always be easily separated" (Asad 2005: p. 4), Irreecha has already begun to serve as a 'counter public', to borrow Nancy Fraser's (1992) formulation, for participants who are sidelined from open political engagements.¹⁶ As a site that was not always successfully controlled by the state, it became an alternative public that developed its own logic and medium of expression to counter the powers that be. These political engagements have been highly spatialised and have altered the spatial configuration of Hora Arsadi. In 2002, MTA built a concrete stage where the ritual, as organised by the association, was centrally held. It was designed for delivering speeches and reciting prayers. Later, the government built a bigger stage which now serves as the central point of the celebration, where the official function takes place. Thus, the MTA stage is abandoned by the ritual's current patrons but is used primarily by the Oromo youth who get together on the spot to either discuss the Waqqeeffana religion or create groups to sing songs. Due to the fact that the youth get together at this stage to practice their politics, I call it the site of dissidence, but the history of its building is also interesting because it was the first step taken by MTA to practically distance itself from what spirit mediums claim is the centre of Irreecha: the lake and the tree.¹⁷ Although the MTA stage seems to be one centre of dissidence that amalgamates the youth, it does not mean that their politics is limited to that

¹⁶ Habermas (1989) pioneers the introduction of the concept of the public sphere. According to him, it is a sphere of rational deliberation by private citizens who get together in public places to discuss important matters of and for the common good. Nancy Fraser stipulates that, the public sphere, if there is one, was not and is not an openly accessible arena in which all private citizens participate. Rather, it was discriminatory on the basis of gender, race, and ethnicity. In response to its inaccessibility to all, alternative and counter publics emerge to enter dialogue with the hegemonic public sphere. This leads to the diversification of the public (Fraser 1992). Whereas Fraser challenges Habermas's claim to inclusiveness of the public and the introduction of subaltern publics, she has not taken religion into account as a basis of discrimination to access the public sphere.

¹⁷ In its very formation, spirit mediums and their ritual performances were not included on the stage. It was a sign that the MTA did not want to recognise the mediumistic version of the celebration, which was mainly spearheaded by the mediums and their adherents. Building its own stage translates to creating a space of seclusion from which the mediums

space. The songs infiltrate almost every space in the city and lake area. More particularly, roads become interesting venues for the fact that they entertain perhaps the highest concentration of political performance as the youth run in groups while singing songs of resistance. Both the nature of politics and the spatial configuration has changed since 2014, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

1.2 *A Matter of Time: October 2014 and October 2016*

What seems to be typical of politics of dissidence, as shown in the foregoing discussions, is that it is primarily party oriented as accentuated by the participants. Within the framework of contemporary Ethiopia, the TPLF, OPDO and OLF are at the centre, contesting for political legitimisation with differing ideologies that attempt to solve the Oromo national question. For EPRDF (TPLF and OPDO), the basic question has already been addressed through ethnic federalism, and the Oromo should remain under the umbrella of the federal state that empowered them to exercise their socio-cultural, political and economic rights. For OLF, the issue of self-determination up to secession remained fundamental. While TPLF/OPDO accuses the OLF of being a narrow nationalist group that advocates separation, the latter regards the OPDO as ~~being a~~ fabrication of TPLF,¹⁸ a puppet organisation used to control and exploit the Oromo people and their resources. This is one of the factors that has led to the strengthening of competing narratives and provisions regarding the Oromo and their fate as a nation.¹⁹ Thus, despite the attempt to constitutionally address the issue of nationalities, the Ethiopian political atmosphere is still thick with multiple political contestations and demands.²⁰ One prominent example in the contested

are excluded, strengthening the argument that mediumistic performance is not in line with the essence of Oromo religion as envisioned by the MTA.

18 TPLF is believed to be the major actor in the formation of the ethnic coalition EPRDF, the party that has been ruling the country since 1991. Parties formed by different ethnic groups including the Amhara, Tigre, Oromo and the southern nations, constitute it. The Oromo are represented by OPDO.

19 Zahorik (2011) highlights the internal dynamics and diversities within what seems to be presented as a monolithic notion of Oromo nationalism and goes on to introduce at least three different kinds of Oromo nationalism which he calls the academic nationalism, virtual or long distance nationalism and everyday nationalism. Each presents its own ideals of what the Oromo nation should look like. These typologies are important for they problematise the totalising tendencies that seem to characterise Oromo nationalist sentiments as homogenous across time and geographical locations.

20 The formation of the federal state in 1991 that theoretically devolved power to the federated states while reducing the power of the central state was applauded. The OLF and other sympathisers initially welcomed the arrangement as a reward for their decades of struggle for freedom and wider political space. However, soon the question of

terrain of the contemporary Ethiopian political landscape is the perpetual flourishing of Oromo nationalism. The quest for self-determination raised by the OLF in the 1970s led to the articulation of the Oromo question, the demand for more political space in the state apparatus or even for secession.²¹ These questions and sentiments remained relevant, gaining momentum by the day and drawing the Oromo together to engage in the quest for freedom and justice with the determination to fight more than ever before. Irreecha is a crystallisation point for this politics as it is taken up by political subjectivities that are formed within these dynamic historic and political processes and that, in their own ways, shape and reshape the processes.

As observed in the folksongs that accentuate the dismissal of EPRDF/OPDO/TPLF and praise the OLF, Irreecha participants seem to be fighting for the replacement of one with the other, which may not necessarily promise socio-political transformation nor cultivate a wider emancipatory option for oppressed people across the board. They are just as susceptible to reproducing the injustice since they seem to fight on behalf of a marginalised political population that tries to find its way back to the structure of political power. The urge to displace TPLF/OPDO seemed to have prominence more than demands that the state attend to popular grievances. Based on political struggles in urban South Africa and rural Uganda, Mahmood Mamdani (1996) asserts that the nature of rule dictates the nature of resistance waged against it. For him, political struggles “bore the institutional imprint of that mode of rule. Every movement of resistance was shaped by the very structure of power against which it rebelled. How it came to understand this historical fact, and the capacity it marshalled to transcend it, set the tone and course of the movement”

self-determination up to secession that is stipulated in article 39 of the 1995 constitution became a bone of contention between the Oromo elites, mainly spearheaded by OLF and the Ethiopian government as the regime refused its implementation. Remaining part of the federal arrangement did not seem a viable option for some political groups like the OLF, given that the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia has persisted as centralised as it was in the past with a high concentration of power in the hands of a few at the federal level. Thus, it became apparent that the issue of political power distribution was not yet adequately addressed, and more specifically, the granting of autonomy to the federated regional states is not well implemented. This led to the escalation of political tensions and contradictions geared towards mobilising the Oromo for a common political agenda that brings powers together in organising the quest for political space and self-determination (cf. Keller 1995; Mengisteab 2007; Chanie 1998).

- 21 The word question, although used by a few scholars, is still problematic for a few others as it entails the dismissal of the Oromo agency in deciding their own fates. ‘Question’ is criticised for involving other parties who should answer the question for the Oromo instead of the Oromo themselves taking up the initiative to decide on their own fates.

(Mamdani 1996: p. 25) And in this sense, the political practices at Hora Arsadi in which ethnic identities are implicated are a mirror image of party politics that strive to seize power based on claims of representation rather than a popular struggle that pronounces demands that are not necessarily tied to claiming power. The historical and current precedence for such political ambition is located in identity. Identity, be it religious or ethnic, is an important factor that is mobilised to determine not only group identification and political affiliation (Sanders 2002) but also access to state/political power, and this is even more so the case following ethnic federalism, where claims to power are highly informed by ethnic identities and where one belongs in that arrangement. Although ethnic identity as the major category for political claims is accentuated after ethnic federalism is instituted, it is also important to note that identity has historically been a major point of contention. However, there comes a radical move away from a party-oriented politics that unquestionably endorsed OLF as the saviour of the Oromo. The kind of politics that Irreecha entertained in the 1990s and early 2000s began to shift, particularly in the last few years. This has become more vivid in recent times as the below discussion shows.

2 #OromoProtest

Looking at the turn of events in the last few years and the pace at which things are happening, one postulation comes to mind: perhaps it was only a matter of time before the inevitable shift would happen. The Oromo youth that I ~~am~~ talking about in this section are composed of various sections of society, both female and male; some university, college and high school students, others involved in various sectors and still others—the bulk of them—unemployed youth. These are agents who predominantly demand fundamental change addressing the Oromo social, economic and political questions. As their predecessors did in the 1990s, the youth also resort to folksongs, bodily decorations and colourful clothes as mediums to criticise and express resistance to the government. Beginning in the 2000s, the political developments in the country were raising more questions than they were addressing. The regime was becoming more oppressive and less tolerant of political differences. Popular demands for justice, distribution of wealth, participatory development or anything that was perceived as ‘political’ were regarded as threats to the system. The default response was a heavy-handed crackdown, mass arrests and detention. This became more alarming after the May 2005 election, which offered a glimpse of hope as the government opened a space for more political dialogue

and conversation. Following the post-election violence, the face of the government changed and authoritarianism became entrenched more than ever before. Quite a number of opposition political parties were made illegal and hence banned, NGOs and civil society associations were put under strict surveillance and some were even banned. The 2009 anti-terrorist proclamation provided a legal foundation to shut down media outlets and arrest journalists, ordinary citizens as well as party members on the grounds that they have connections with a group or individuals linked to the parties, like OLF and Ginbot 7, which were dubbed terrorists. This became even worse following the death of Prime Minister Meles in 2012. The passing of the prime minister somehow came with yet another chapter of hope, initially but did not last long because his death did not introduce any systemic and structural change except his replacement by another person called Hailemariam Desalegn from the same party, which is EPRDF.

On the other hand, these shifts in the political atmosphere meant more demands and more determination. The nature and articulations of politics have shifted as much as the agents who articulated them. Notwithstanding this, the strict and brutal measures by the regime intimidated and silenced citizens at the same time as they aggravated and energised the youth everywhere. The youth were becoming more radical, more assertive and militant. They continued making their demands in any way possible at any opportunity. For the Oromo youth, Irreecha was as relevant or even more relevant than before in terms of serving as a space for political articulations. Its relevance was even more appreciable because these were times when Ethiopia closed spaces for other forms of politics. The Oromo youth, who were becoming visibly political and who could be regarded as the successors of the previous generation, continued to put forward the 'Oromo question' on the stage of Irreecha, the alternative political space that has become increasingly complex. Needless to say, at the same time, the space is highly regulated with more government measures taken against participants if they were perceived to defy the order. This was the overall context for the 2014 celebration.

In the 2014 Irreecha, the youth made it obvious that they were frustrated with OLF. They would wait no more. The party that had inspired thousands of Oromo youth and was able to mobilise the support of millions was not the same as it had been. It has remained a matter of memory in terms of bringing about the change its supporters hoped for, and the generational difference is notable. As we saw previously, the OLF was once regarded as the one hope for the Oromo, while here it featured less although it was still present. This sentiment was captured in more explicit terms in the 2014 celebration, which happened just a few months after the April nationwide protest. They sang 'yaa

ABO sii egee dhadhabee kae'e baduu laata' (waiting for you is exhausting me, OLF, should I run away or what?). In the song, they invoke OLF and state that they have long counted on it but it did not show any progress. As much as they stopped counting on OLF,²² they were even more frustrated with the very existence of OPDO. OPDO is perceived as a party that has exposed the Oromo to more oppression and exploitation over the years. They called out OPDO, saying, 'Didnee didnee didnee' (we disobey, we disobey, we disobey), and this became the other recurring line, saying that they cannot take it any longer from OPDO. It became a moment that introduced different kind of politics, which in a way detached itself from both parties and sought solutions in popular struggle, where the Oromo youth claim to be the owners of their own fate. Why is 2014 a milestone?

In 2014 the Addis Ababa city administration publicised a project proposal that it had been developing for the last few years. This plan was called the Addis Ababa Master Plan. According to the new plan, the city was to be expanded in all directions, and this involved taking land from the farmers living on the peripheries of the capital. The grand plan was also a move that would have engulfed the booming towns within Oromia regional state, which in turn was about to compromise the autonomy of the region. This was received with protest and demonstrations. The government responded by labelling the protesters as messengers of the diaspora-based anti-peace and development forces. The protest continued and the government continued to respond by crushing the protest, leading to the death of some 40 to 50 civilians together with the destruction of both government and privately owned properties. This happened in April and it was just a spark, as Beza Tesfaye describes it, preparing the country for what was to come later on.²³ After this incident in April, the atmosphere of the October 2014 celebration of Irreecha was engulfed with fear, disappointment, bitterness and anger.²⁴ The youth passionately opposed this new plan and the Irreecha celebration became a platform to express protest against it. Owing to the political context of the 2014 celebration, the infamous

22 The internal division within the party that has mobilised thousands was also discouraging to those who had a high regard for it. OLF became so many things, to the extent it became taxing to locate it within the ideological framework it had committed itself to for decades. This internal decay did not help the youth but rather made them less attracted to it.

23 Beza Tesfaye. (2016) The Point of no Return in Ethiopia. [Online] Available from: <https://africasacountry.com/2016/10/the-point-of-no-return-in-ethiopia> [Accessed 25 November 2016].

24 See also Serawit (2018).

land grab for the implementation of the Addis Ababa Master Plan was sung about as follows:

Enyusheen Eynusheen kan akkana jettu	Who does she think she is to say this
Maal rakkatte mormashee hin kuttuu	Why do you care, just cut her throat
Yookin Finffinee yookin mormakoo	Either Addis Ababa, either my throat
Yookin Orommiyaa yookin mormakoo	Either Oromia, either my throat
Ani garu hingadhiisu biyyakoo	I shall never let my country go

The political message here is not necessarily related to appealing to OLF but comes in the form of self-sacrifice and martyrdom. Land was compared to life where the participants expressed their readiness to give their lives if it would save Oromia from being taken away. If land is to be equated with life, to die for it then meant a dignified and sacred death, introducing an interesting dimension to what it means to die for a cause. In such a way, the youth expressed their anger, pledged to die for their land, and belittled the masterminds behind the Master Plan. Belittling in this context is performed through feminisation (which in this context is a sign of weakness) of the designers who proposed the Master Plan in terms of 'who does she think she is to say this'. Moreover, Waaqa's intervention for a national breakthrough is sought. The youth sat together and held hands to recite prayers which asked Waaqa to empower the people.²⁵ They joined hands and stretched them to pray to Waaqa, saying:

Lafa keenyatti nu haa bulchu	Let him ensure we administer our land
Malkaa qabnuun nu haa bulchu	Let him ensure we administer our water
Tulluu qabnuun nu haa bulchu	Let him ensure we administer our mountains
Waaqayyoon nu haa dhaga'u	Let him answer our pleas and prayers

This prayer was followed by many songs that revolved around the land reform that was introduced earlier in 2014 to expand Addis Ababa at the expense of the surrounding parts of the Oromia regional state. In addition, they sang 'Finfinneen handhuura keenya hin keeninuu murree' (Addis Ababa is our (umbilical cord) root; we will not cut and give it away). To allow the authorities to cut it away was a form of death for Oromia which they were not ready to accept. They were rather prepared to die to avoid the cutting of their root, which is the land. 'Daangan haa kabajamuu' (let borders be respected, let no one

²⁵ This is however a much recent development, since in the past, prayer is held on the state-sponsored stage and everyone gathers there to receive blessings from the elderly.

infringe and encroach). ‘Oromoon haa kabajamuu’ (let Oromo be respected) were trending. What is interesting in their articulations of Finfinnee is that they expanded their claims on Addis Ababa, instead of/apart from fighting its expansion by taking away land from Oromia. This feeds directly into the recent debates over who owns Addis Ababa and who belongs there.²⁶

A few months after the initial outbreak of protests in April, the government seemed to have managed to quell the unrest. It was also stated that the Master Plan which provoked such an uproar was cancelled, or so have officials stated on the media. However, it has become obvious to many that the decision could not be trusted so the protests had expanded instead of stopping. As Beza put it:

Though the Master Plan has been abandoned for now, thousands of people across Oromia and more recently Amhara regions have continued to protest against the government. Their demands are fairly basic: human rights, an end to authoritarian rule, equal treatment of all ethnic groups, and restoration of ancestral lands that have been snatched and sold oftentimes under the guise of development.²⁷

In a sense, 2014 was a ‘last anchor point,’ presenting “the possibility of that moment when life can no longer be bought, when the authorities can no longer do anything, and when, facing the gallows and the machine guns, people revolt” (Foucault 2001: pp. 449–50). It was a moment that marked that when pushed beyond the limit, people disobey the authorities and revolt no matter what the response from the state. It signalled an end of an era, a point at which people gave up. The homogenous empty time the regime pushed in the name of progress and a better future was unraveled by the youth introducing a “new calendar” as Walter Benjamin (1968) would call it. Progress envisioned in the future ceased introducing a moment of hope from the wreckage that has been piling up skyward. This accumulated injustice undercut the horizontality of a hegemonic time as imposed by the state. Oppression in the present in anticipation

26 The Finfinnee discussion has become one of the major issues the city administration, the federal state, the Oromia regional state and other stakeholders are implicated in. History is also mobilised by different intellectuals to make claims as to who Addis Ababa belongs to and who belongs in Addis Ababa. The more assertive groups are the Oromo and Amhara groups who contest each other's claims while the general spirit of the city's residents' sentiment problematises ethnic-based claims on the city.

27 Beza Tesfaye. (2016) The Point of no Return in Ethiopia. [Online] Available from: <https://africasacountry.com/2016/10/the-point-of-no-return-in-ethiopia> [Accessed 25 November 2016].

of progress in the future was no more for the Oromo, largely Ethiopian, youth in 2014–16 (Benjamin 1968). As much as the past, the present conditions and deliverance from that past were very much emphasised. The belief in the need for an immediate solution to the Oromo question is demonstrably more pressing for the youth. In many ways they move in time and space to criticise, imagine and challenge the system from the site of transgression.

So in November 2015, another round of Oromo protests started again in Gincii town and expanded to many other cities and towns in Oromia region. It lasted for more than a year and claimed hundreds of lives due to killings conducted by the security forces. In this round of protests across Oromia, the demand was not simply the cancellation of the Master Plan that entailed land grabs. It was a much more fundamental political question that basically demanded the removal of the current regime dominated by TPLF/EPRDF which they explicitly accused of being the major source of the problem. The youth organised and coordinated themselves with support extended to them by activists based in and outside the country.²⁸ At this stage the social media started using the name ‘Qubbee generation’ to refer to the youth who put their lives on the line carrying the Oromo cause. Qubbee generation is a name that refers to children who were schooled at the time the Latin script was adopted for lessons in Oromia region, replacing the ge’ez script. Since this was a post-1991 development and most of the youth groups were educated in this newly introduced system, they are called the Qubbee generation. Later on Qeerro replaced Qubbee and the youth also took it up at Hora Arsadi and started to call themselves Qeerro.²⁹ Although I will continue using it in this section, I also find the term ‘Qeerro’ problematic mainly because it is a masculine term that discursively removes the female participants in the protest throughout the regional state. The word in Oromiffa means tiger and conceals the tigress, while Qubbee is more inclusive because it refers to a generation that went to school after a change to the curriculum. And yet, females were an integral part of the struggle; they went out on the streets, they went to Hora Arsadi, they were and still are as active as their male counterparts in the political struggle.

The Irreecha celebration of October 2016 staged what appeared to be the apex of the yearlong protest when it was converted by the Qeerro to an arena to make more serious political demands. Thus 2016 was “a point of no return”,

28 The emblematic role played by Jawar Mohammed, among others, is of great significance and requires further research in relation to social movement, youth movement, social media activism, coordination and so on.

29 Qeerro has been in use in the Oromiffa newspaper that was founded and active during the Därg. In a 1976 publication, the word is used to refer to the militia. So, the use of Qeerro to refer to the militant Oromo youth is not necessarily a recent invention.

according to Beza Tesfaye.³⁰ What happened was unprecedented in the history of the celebration. The October 2016 Irreecha celebration came with a shift that entailed a more radical demand. The focus on change and transformation was altered, where the youth now demanded the removal of the party. Hours before the incident on the stage that culminated in deaths, there was a call for an alliance with the police and also OPDO by the Qeerro. It goes:

Nu isin hin jibbinee, nu hin jibbinaa:	We do not hate you, do not hate us
Isiniifuu hin taane, nuuf hinta'an	These people [the enemy] are not
jarreen kun:	doing you any good let alone us
Isiniinuu asiin gadee isin qo'aa	They [the enemy] are attacking even
jiran, didaa didaa didaa:	you Disobey, disobey, disobey
Didnee didnee didnee didaa didaa	We disobeyed we disobeyed we di
didaa OPDOo didaa:	obeyed OPDO disobey

Ummanni Oromoo inni bahaa inni kibbaa inni dhihaa [inni kaabaa]
 inni Arsii inni Wallaggaa, inni Amboo inni Baalee inni Gujii, inni
 Booranaa addaan wal hinbasnu
 dhagaan addaan hin baanu, tulluun addaan hin baanu, malkaan addan
 hin baanu

Oromo of the East, of the West, Oromo of South, Oromo of Arsi, Oromo of
 Waalaga, Oromo of Ambo, Oromo of Bale, Oromo of Guji, Oromo of Borana,
 will never go apart. No mountain, no river, no stone could ever separate us.

Yoo ilma Oromoo taatee ilma Oromoo dabarsitee diinaf kenite
 Lafeen wareegamtoota keenyaa isin yaa waraantu
 Lafeen barratota kegna isin yaa waraantu

If you are a son of Oromo, if you give another son of Oromo to the enemy, may
 the bone of our martyrs stab you may the bone of our students stab you.

30 Beza Tesfaye. (2016) The Point of no Return in Ethiopia. [Online] Available from: <https://africasacountry.com/2016/10/the-point-of-no-return-in-ethiopia> [Accessed 25 November 2016].

Yaa Poolisii ati nu dhiisi:	Police please leave us alone
biddeenii jettee nu hin reebin:	Please do not beat us for the sake of your benefits
biddeenii jettee nu hin ajjessin:	Please do not kill us for the sake of your benefits
atis Oromoodha numa keessaa baatee:	You too are an Oromo, you are one of us.
Ummata kana yoo faltes, biddeen kana hoo nyaattes:	Even if you protect/rescue them, even if you benefit from them
boru sitti deebi'anii si hajjeesu; waliifuu hin taane:	tomorrow they will kill you, they are not good even for each other [they being the enemy]
Alamayoo ajjeesanii; waliifuu hin taane:	They killed Alemayehu [was the president of the regional state]
Didi Ofirratti beekii:	Disobey, know for yourself
jarreen du'anirratti beekii:	Learn from those who were killed.
Obolessakee hin ajjeesin:	Do not kill your brother
oboleettiikee hin hidhin:	Do not arrest your sister
Obolessakee hin hidhin:	Do not arrest your brother
lammiileekee hin hidhin:	do not arrest your people.

This was a time when they were trying to foster alliances with the police to tame the anticipated brutality. They use the shared identity and also point out that TPLF is the common enemy and its allies within OPDO are no longer trustworthy as they have committed a lot of atrocities against the Oromo people. The youth called for the creation of a united front against TPLF's hegemony. It is also a kind of politics that would turn the police forces against the group that they believe has betrayed or even exposed the Oromo to violence that has been witnessed in the course of the two years since 2014. The Qeerro were demonstrating explicit indebtedness to those who died in those two years by referring to them as martyrs and students ('students' here is not to be taken literally, as it means those whose futures were buried for the sake of others, those whose lives were cut short). In this performative approach, they were confronting the immediacy of power that the police embodied and which became the manifestation of the 'chief enemy,' a frightening and violent entity.

In the songs and prayers above, the youth were trying to invite the Oromo police and army, speaking in a language they believe is shared between the two who seem to stand at opposing ends of the struggle. The youth were trying to win them back by pointing out the danger the police forces are in. They

were also telling them that the police have a lot more in common with the Oromo youth, including their roots, than they have with what is regarded as the enemy—in that moment the TPLF. They were alerting the police to the risk they did not seem to heed, by saying they have committed crimes that targeted fellow Oromos and that their fate would be death unless they refrain from attacking and instead join ‘their folks’. The Qeerro pointed out the risk which invoking the bone of the martyrs and Waaqa implied, to show the police that their position would sooner or later be detrimental, shaking the foundation of their very existence. What the police are doing is self-destructive on many levels, according to the Qeerro. It is self-destructive because they will be eaten by the system they are trying to protect. Once it eats them, they have nowhere to go to for shelter because they have compromised their relationship with their ‘people,’ and last but not least, the divine is involved in making it a double-edged sword. Where things would go wrong here and when they die, the afterlife would be even worse because Waaqa has turned away from them due to the fact that they turned away from their ‘people’. The police would be subjected to a curse unless and until they give in to the youth’s plea. Apart from the plea and the ensuing curse, these recitations were a clear indication of the ‘us’ and ‘them’ dichotomy that was sharpening over the years. There is a clearly defined enemy that the young males and females were up against, with its face soon to be disclosed.

At this point, Irreecha was a point of “assembling the people, a summoning together for a precise purpose” (Fanon 1967: p. 49). It amalgamated Oromo protesting together as a melting pot that brought everyone from all corners of the regional state. As anticipated by many who were looking forward to that day to get together and escalate dissidence as a united voice, Irreecha 2016 indeed became that point of no return, given that the occasion was never the same afterwards. It was the moment that ended subtlety of resistance as expressed in songs, attire and bodily decorations; the subordinated took centre-stage. The youth abandoned what James Scot (1990) would have called ‘hidden transcripts’ and came out to confront the state through their bodily action, in which the spirit of resistance is inscribed, as well as their verbal demand, which called for an end to the TPLF/EPRDF regime. This reached its climax as embodied by the moment of ‘Down, down, Wāyané. Down, down, TPLF’. ‘Down, down, Wāyané! Down, down, TPLF’, a moment that seems to have brought an end to fear and intimidation at Hora Arsadi.

The incident in 2016 was a moment of rupture, a standstill within the most idealised and delicate state-society relations, by extension signalling the vulnerability of the state. The splendour, order, majesty and magnificence were defied as a result of the protest that reached its climax of expression at that

site. The spaces which seemed to have been divided merged and it became a murky site in which a mishmash of struggles of the oppressed and the marginalised collided with the oppressor, whose response was rather hostile. In his interpretation of the art of resistance by the subordinated, James Scot states that at some point comes the moment when the usual “fugitive political conduct of the subordinate” ceases to exist in that form and “rare moments of political electricity when, often for the first time in memory, the hidden transcript is spoken directly and publicly in the teeth of power” (Scot, xiii). Irreecha 2016 is one such rare moment, and one that we need to pay attention to if we are to thoroughly understand the agency of popular politics and subjectivities in challenging what appears to be a well ingrained power structure.

Thus, murder in the guise of protecting peace and security altered the relationship of the Oromo with the state. Immediately after the 2016 atrocity at Hora Arsadi, the youth in different parts of the Oromia region took violent actions, including the burning of factories and commercial farms. Activists announced the transition of the struggle to another level, changing the hashtag #OromoProtest to #OromoRevolution,³¹ which immediately began trending on social media. The ability to kill was no longer the reliable bedrock on which the sovereignty of the state could rely. If anything, it became the seedbed on which its own displacement was planted. It rather produced subjects who actively dissociate themselves from it and resorted to the politics of dissidence. The death toll and the atrocity that happened did not seem to stop the youth from protesting, nor did the state of emergency that was declared a week after Irreecha 2016. The government tried to introduce ‘deep reform,’ none of which attended to the demands the youth made, and this negligence coupled with the anger about Irreecha 2016 exasperated the protesters. Such moments and histories are not simply confined to the Oromo people or to what happened at Hora Arsadi. They are manifestations of a rotten state structure that is begging for reform if not fundamental change. They are expressions that people in the country are fed up with the false hope the regime continues to project. The eruption of protests everywhere in the country became commonplace. What had been limited to Oromia regional state was spreading to other parts, particularly and most forcefully in the Amhara region, which was the second most prominent in taking political demands to the streets and resisting the authoritarian structure.

31 Jawar Mohammed introduced this notion, on Facebook, explaining that the Oromo youth struggle has now moved a step forward and nothing except a fundamental change will put it down.

This was the state of the state between the two Irreechas: the protests which claimed the lives of thousands went on unabated with a climax at Hora Arsadi in 2016. Michel Foucault's description of the Iranian revolution of 1979, where participants took the risk to confront the powers that be, is parallel to the situation at Hora Arsadi in 2016 and what happened in the subsequent weeks. Foucault ponders, "[F]or anyone who tried to understand what was going on in the heads of these men and women when they were risking their lives, one thing was striking. They inscribed their humiliations, their hatred for the regime, and their resolve to overthrow it at the bounds of heaven and earth, in an envisioned history that was religious just as much as it was political" (2001: p. 449). The government's increasing heavy-handedness became a driving force for the young protesters, goading to persevere in the face of their brutalisation, and the same acts the regime deployed to save itself began to cause its own undoing. The struggle for change persisted even in the face of a harsh crackdown and more deaths, as described below:

In the week that followed, angry youth attacked government buildings and private businesses, leading to an abusive and far-reaching state of emergency, lifted in August 2017. During the state of emergency, security forces arbitrarily detained over 21,000 people in "rehabilitation camps," artists, politicians, and journalists were tried on politically motivated charges; there were increased limitations on internet access; and many communities reported heavier than usual military presence. Despite government promises of "deep reform" to address protester grievances, there has been little movement on fundamental issues raised by protesters, including the lack of political space and brutality of the security forces, during the year-long protests, heightening tensions further ahead of this year's Irreecha.³²

In these processes their subjectivities were inscribed onto the political domain and they became subjects of history, not having anyone else or a group like OLF to revolt for them. This was a moment that reminds us of, yet again the Iranian revolution which Foucault, describes as

32 Human Rights Watch. (2017) "Fuel on the Fire": Security Force Response to the 2016 Irreecha Cultural Festival. [Online] Available from: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/09/19/fuel-fire/security-force-response-2016-irreecha-cultural-festival> [Accessed 19 May 2018].

the impulse by which a single individual, a group, a minority, or an entire people says, 'I will no longer obey,' and throws the risk of their life in the face of an authority they consider unjust seems to me to be something irreducible. Because no authority is capable of making it utterly impossible....: And because the man who rebels is finally inexplicable; it takes a wrenching-away that interrupts the flow of history, and its long chains of reasons, for a man to be able, "really," to prefer the risk of death to the certainty of having to obey (2001: p. 449).

Death is redefined in the language of sacrifice to signify an anticipated freedom, for the self as well as others, and also end waiting in the anticipation of progress in the future. They chose death, or the risk of it, rather than live in humiliation. The youth were no longer willing to give in to the promises of certainty and continuity that obedience to the despotic government bore. In their dissidence, they were aware that they would interrupt the state's perpetuation insofar as they put their lives on the line and took the risk of being interrupted. In their possible interruption, they also knew another flow was getting introduced: of reclaimed and new histories, new hopes and possibilities of imagining freedom out of the linear time of progress. There are other ideas of time, history and subjectivities inscribed in the act of one's interruption. Every time someone dies, it is not mourned but celebrated as one step closer to the uncrowning of the subordinating status quo in which is implied the crowning of a new beginning in the Bakhtinian sense. As Bakhtin has it, one dies "a historic death. But in this system death is followed by regeneration, by the new year, new youth, and a new spring. Therefore, abuse is followed by praise; they are two aspects of one world, each with its own body" (Bakhtin 1984: p. 198).

What was to be born eventually from this time that was pregnant with a wind of change? The quote below from Mikhail Bakhtin captures what time does in terms of introducing hope from what seems to be a hopeless situation, which is what was experienced in the context of the state of emergency.

All the events shown in this episode present the character of a popular-festive comic performance: it is a gay and free play, but it is also full of deep meaning. Its hero and author is time itself, which uncrowns, covers with ridicule, kills the old world (the old authority and truth), and at the same time gives birth to the new. In this game there is a protagonist and a laughing chorus. The protagonist is the representative of a world which is aging, yet pregnant and generating. He is beaten and mocked, but the blows are gay, melodious, and festive. The abuses also follow this merry

and creative pattern. The protagonist is adorned as a comic victim with bright ribbons. The images of the bodies rent apart are also important (1984: p. 207).

Parallel to the protests going on in the region, some changes within OPDO emerged in these years. Quite a number of OPDO's high-ranking members opposed the Master Plan along with the public, asserting themselves as clear opponents of the expropriation of land, as land was equated to an expression of Oromumma for which even those within the party were ready to pay the price. The party became porous in such a way that there emerged room to entertain dissident ideas and tension between TPLF and OPDO was growing as an obvious OPDO and Amhara National Democratic Movement (henceforth ANDM) alliance was emerging. These were moments that challenged the survival of the old EPRDF as a coalition party in which, as most believe, TPLF had the upper hand. It was another important moment which brought an end to Lisa Wedeen's (1999) politics of 'as if' and dissimulation. It was becoming more obvious by the day that party members were shedding their conformism and shattering the networks of loyalty. Technocrats and politicians began taking positions in alliance with the cause the youth were fighting for. New subjectivities within the once obedient OPDO and ANDM were being formed and reconfigured in the language of disobedience and resistance. One prominent example was Takele Uma Benti, who was appointed as the mayor of Addis Ababa city in July 2018. During the time the Addis Ababa Master Plan was being deliberated on by stakeholders, he was the mayor of Sululta town. He fiercely criticised the plan for having not been a bottom-up proposal, having compromised the interests and identity of the surrounding Oromo community, and he hinted at the problem the city expansion creates for the regional state in general. This was a telling moment, indicating that the OPDO had become a breeding ground for reformists/opposition from within.³³

Quite (un)surprisingly, opposition conceived within EPRDF's state gave birth to the OPDO, a party once dubbed as a conformist puppet of TPLF, not good enough for the Oromo. That party that has been accused of exposing the Oromo to all the repression after 1991, was reincarnated, taking a new form and shape. It came after dusting itself off with a brand new claim which appropriated the language of the youth who have been shouting for change. OPDO emerged as the saviour of the Oromo from its own (OPDO/EPRDF's) tyranny with the emergence of the famous 'team Lemma'. This team showed itself

33 See his intervention here: https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=addis+ababa+city+new+master+plan.

via the face of Abiy Ahmed (then president of the regional state and Prime Minister since April 2018), Lemma Megersa (the president of the regional state) and Addisu Kitessa (head of the regional state's communications bureau), the three new forces who were to shake OPDO to its core with their reformist agendas. OPDO fostered an alliance with ANDM's leadership—Gedu Andargachew, then ANDM's chairperson and president of the Amhara regional state, Demeke Mekonnen, then deputy chair of ANDM as well as deputy prime minister and Nigusu Tilahun then director general of Amhara regional state's communications affairs—in what was dubbed as Oro-mara (to stand for Oromo Amhara alliance). In their public appearances, they repeatedly insisted that if they referred to Qeerro and generally the youth everywhere as anti-peace, anti-stability and anti-development forces that collaborate with the enemy, they would be saying that about themselves, because they have now become part of the struggle for justice. They began to be celebrated as the new opposition from within EPRDF,³⁴ and some long time opponents began to appreciate them as the faces of a new change, if not to openly associate with them. Again, Mikhail Bakhtin (1984: p. 217) aptly captures this when he writes, "death of the old is linked with regeneration; all the images are connected with the contradictory oneness of the dying and reborn world." Mahmood Mamdani's provocation about formation of alliances across movements and political groups is worth noting in this context. In his astute observation of some commenters, he tackles the assumption that ethnic based movements are retrogressive while supraethnic ones are progressive. Proponents of this assumption fail to account for possibilities whereby we encounter ethnic based socio-political movements and parties that contain socially based progressive ideals and commitments. The Oromo youth for example put to question the socio-economic and political structures that oppress the majority, and later on sought alliances with others like the Amhara. The emergence of #TeamLemma is also an outcome of this alliance pushed by the leadership of the two parties within EPRDF. As Mamdani (1996: p. 186) points out, what these developments indicate is that by virtue of being ethnically based, social movements are not necessarily retrogressive. Perhaps it is about time that hard core 'Ethioianists' who aim for supraethnic political alternatives reconsider their position about ethnically located movements as sites of potential for broader societies. As Mamdani (2018) himself points out in another piece, despite the fact that we have to endeavour to transcend them, we are all located in history and locality

34 Hassen Hussein and Mohammed Ademo. (2017) Ethiopia: Is OPDO the new opposition party? An Appraisal. [Online] Available from: <https://www.opride.com/2017/11/11/ethiopia-is-opdo-the-new-opposition-party-an-appraisal/> [Accessed 20 March 2018].

which are certainly starting points for alliances and imagining liberatory possibilities. In any case, the symbolic death of old OPDO/ANDM/EPRDF giving birth to new alliances and a 'new' self is embodied by the processes that were unfolding at the Irreecha celebrations. And indeed this leaves us with a lot more questions than we are left for time to answer. But one thing is clear: politics in Ethiopia has exhibited significant change and transformation since 2014.

3 Folksongs as a Medium for Doing Politics

Awol Kassim evaluates the role of music in the Oromo struggle for self-determination over the years. He rightly points out that what is omitted and erased from official discourses and archives is found in songs. Songs are more revealing in terms of capturing years of grievances, histories of marginalisation, articulations of hope and related sentiments.³⁵ They are ballads used in both the everyday and major functions as Irreecha to transmit certain messages from the perspective of the subordinated. The fact that most of the popular struggle at Hora Arsadi mobilised folksongs as a medium of political articulation exposes the power of songs as political catalysts. Liz Gunner (2008: p. 28) remarks that song serves as a "discursive site enabling multiple publics to participate in national debates". Taking the example of 'Umshin Wani', the famous song of Jacob Zuma, the author analyses the role songs play in creating the space for multiple publics. According to Gunner, songs can go viral and become uncontrollable once they enter the public as mediums of expression of discontent with the system (Gunner 2008). Widely consumed and accessible among the Oromo in general, songs are crucial mediums of political expression. Through them Oromo oppose and support political parties, express and envision a more inclusive socio-political order, while criticising their subordination and marginalisation. In so doing, they assert themselves as subjects who have the capability to question authorities and propose alternatives, even in the face of suffocating authoritarian rule. They put the state's claims to test. This is accomplished through folksongs that typically have no standardised verses; they are improvised on the spot, allowing innovativeness and making it possible to add more verses in response to what is going on in the country. The songs do not have a structured style with a fixed number of participants, and this adds to their fluidity and communal-ness. The call-and-response style

35 Formore <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/poetics-and-politics-of-oromo-resistance/>.

makes it easy for people to participate even if they do not know the whole song. Leaders can take turns in leading the songs, which are generally successful in attracting large numbers of participants to sing along with them or as spectators.

However, these highly political folksongs and prayers have repercussions on the youth. For instance, someone in the crowd of celebrants once told me that he had been randomly caught and detained three times for participating in the group songs. He said, “The OPDO people do not like us singing because what we sing is against what they want the people to believe about them. Even why they started sponsoring the music band is not because they wanted to entertain the people. It is because they wanted to destabilise the traditional songs because they do not like them”.³⁶

The power of songs in the Oromo political struggle has historical roots (Mollenhauer 2011) and is not limited to occasions like Irreecha. The last few years have required songs, as much as the songs transformed the political struggle in the context of the Oromo Protest. They began to serve as the major, if not the only, channel the youth appropriated every time they were on the street. The songs by the Oromo youth do exactly what Franz Fanon said a few decades ago. He wrote that these

[s]tories, epics and songs of the people, which formerly were filed away [...] are now beginning to change. The storytellers who used to relate inert episodes introduce into them modifications that are increasingly fundamental. There is a tendency to bring conflicts up to date and to modernise the kinds of struggle which the stories evoke, together with the names of heroes and the types of weapons (1967: p. 48).

³⁶ However, within the music band, there are some subversive singers who use the context the regional state created to touch on some sensitive areas. For instance, Tadele Gemechu and Jambo Jote, famous pop singers, are known for appropriating music to enforce nationalist sentiments and unity. Kemer Yesuf, a singer who lived abroad for many years and who has been known as an enthusiastic supporter of OLF, was invited during the Ethiopian millennium and he sang one of his very celebrated songs, which revolves around the imagination of Oromia as an independent state. Referring to his encounter while living abroad, Kemer sings, ‘when they asked me where I come from, I told them I am from Oromia’. Other popular singers like Shumet Edosa, Gelane Bulbula and Mohammed Zihen sing about the revival of Oromo tradition and the role the Oromo should play to uphold their neglected traditions. The introduction of the band is thus serving both purposes of aesthetics and politics. And yet, just like folksongs at the site of dissidence, there is also another layer of politics as performed by the pop singers, who make points about unity, resistance and pride in one’s cultural tradition.

Their allusions mostly attend to current struggles and future aspirations, or even threats to embedded structures of power. Songs take centre stage in mediating the popular struggle and are able to disseminate the message of resistance and dissidence quite effectively. Paying tribute to this, Awol Kassim acknowledges the role of Oromo music in “enunciating the ‘Oromo Question’”. He writes

the Oromo use poetry, music, and storytelling both to articulate their experiences of marginalization and to resist forms of knowledge and modes of interpretation used to legitimize their oppression. Originating from a deep well of Oromo tradition, music has served as the single most important expressive art form used—a site of counter-memory and counter-culture. Among the downtrodden and reviled of the world, Oromos turned to music to resist official narratives and hegemonic interpretations, undoing imposed silences, and disrupting established frameworks of remembering and forgetting.³⁷

4 Media

Irreecha is that which links the Oromo on one level as a uniting ethno-religious practice, and at another as a symbol that unites the otherwise geographically dispersed groups. The internet-based media channel the communication between the two subjects (diaspora and locally based Oromo), while the local celebration provides cultural resources which at times are reassuring, providing a basis for collective identity, and the Oromo living abroad provide emotional and ideological support to the local celebrants through the media. In the fourth chapter, I have shown how state-run media are mobilised in relation to Irreecha and its representation as well as appropriation in the service of political messages in favour of the state. The relation of Irreecha to media mostly run by activists introduces yet another interesting dimension to the manner in which politics features at Hora Arsadi.³⁸ It is amidst the instrumentalisation

³⁷ Formore <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/poetics-and-politics-of-oromo-resistance/>.

³⁸ The Ethiopian State is generally stringent when it comes to media freedom, and more particularly those that are owned by opposition. However, the age at which such alternatives thrive is making it much easier to circumvent the inhibitions and banning to get across to the local community. The proliferation of social media and the ever improving access to the internet in the Ethiopian context, in tandem with the increasing politicisation of Irreecha, have taken the mediatisation of Irreecha as a political site to a much more complex level.

of the digital media that Irreecha found its way onto the internet.³⁹ Irreecha's emergence via social media is part of new media appropriations in building Oromumma for 'positive' social change. Various issues regarding the ritual are publicised using these alternative media outlets. For instance, the significance of Irreecha in promoting Oromo unity and identity is one of the major themes raised by the internet media. The online media continued flourishing and in March 2014 an online television station called Oromia Media Network was launched. It has since its foundation become a major source of information for the diaspora Oromo and also some in Ethiopia, regardless of the effort to stifle ~~them~~.

While the state-owned media neglect the space and practices of dissidence, the online media focus on them and give more time to the folksongs that are used to air criticism against the state. State-owned media outlets have professional journalists and camerapersons who have permission to record the event, while the source of the online media are videos and photographs supplied by people who could be called 'citizen journalists'. Their sources are also complemented by phone interviews given by some anonymous participants. Both the state and the opposition appropriate Irreecha to push forward their own respective ideologies through the media. Both have their own inclinations in promoting certain versions of the ritual, depending on the political ideology, interest and motive they uphold. In the case of Irreecha, the media report what appears to be an accepted version of Irreecha by the dominant and conceal the complexity and multiplicity that characterises the ritual. Both state owned and opposition media are used to conflate political ideologies and propositions with the ritual. Both are occupied with orienting their consumers with a certain kind of truth that is claimed by the political group for which they are mouthpieces. But generally, one of the major features shared by most of the online outlets is that they not only emerge as alternatives but also as critics of the state-owned media and their representation of Irreecha. As one of the means employed by different actors to appropriate and domesticate Irreecha, media have a multitude of roles that shape our understanding of state-society relations as performed at Hora Arsadi. On the one hand, media are used to cultivate convivial relations with the public. They are also used to manufacture

39 Regardless of the fact that there is difficulty tracing the exact year of Irreecha's emergence on the internet, its thriving online is part of the general trend of using the cyber media as an alternative means of communication that began in the 1990s. This was when a few websites like www.oromoliberationfront.org started disseminating information regarding the party and its agenda. In the 2000s, more websites, blogs, youtube ports, twitter, Facebook and other kinds of alternative media that are dedicated to promoting the Oromo cause as well as entertainment began to grow vigorously (Dugo 2012).

consent and give the regime's side of the story to the public, showing that the regime is really devoted to catering to the society's expectations and aspirations. On the other hand, the media outlets in which most of the opposition against the regime's self-presentations and its relations with the society are aired show that what the regime presents is not the only truth, capturing the complexity of relations and interactions.

In order to understand whose narrative the media propagate, it is vital to understand the power dynamics and the discursive practices of the time and context. Various media outlets reacted to the Irreecha of October 2, 2016 in many different ways but in a manner that also revealed where they stood in relation to the Oromo political struggle. The Addis Standard⁴⁰ special issue published in the aftermath of the Irreecha atrocity is compelling. #Irreecha Massacre featured as a title with an additional caption that reads, "In memory of the Fallen". The editorial was titled as "#Irreecha Massacre: The day that changed the game" and the main thrust of the piece was a description of the incident and how traumatising it was for those who witnessed it live. It is rich with interviews given by people who were on the spot. This editorial is followed by the second article entitled "A survivor's account," which captures the story as narrated by a journalist who was there to observe and report on the Irreecha celebration. He gives a detailed account beginning from the eve of the celebration until the point at which everything changed at the site of Hora Arsadi and in the Bishoftu city centre. In "Irreecha is sacred: We cannot let them take it away" the contributor shares her experiences with the celebration of Irreecha, her observations in the past few years, the ritual's meaning to her as an individual and the community at large, and how traumatising an experience it was for the Oromo to have witnessed the death of hundreds on such a sacred day at a sacred site. She concludes with an emotional statement where she says, "May we not let the spirit of *Irreecha* be defined by the cruelty, violence and complete disregard for human life." Another guest contributor follows, providing a comprehensive description of the essence of Irreecha in a piece titled "Into the heart of Irreecha: Why is it so important to the Oromo?" In his interventions, he discusses the significance of Irreecha to the Oromo as a nation but with very little focus on the October calamity that Hora Arsadi experienced. The last article is a contribution which focuses on the significance of Irreecha in cementing the Oromo nation together and the ritual's place

40 This is a monthly magazine published in English focusing on political, social, economic, cultural and a host of other related issues. It was launched in December 2011 and distributed to the readership in Ethiopia since then, until its editor-in-chief Tsedale Lemma announced its stoppage in December 2016. Although the magazine is no longer on the market in Ethiopia, the online version is still published.

in the quest for national identity. Referring to Irreecha 2016, the contributor concludes that it will have serious consequences for the future and offers two choices for the government. He states that it should either step down, which he thinks is the best option, or continue killing the people and bear the consequences. This edition of *Addis Standard* is dedicated to the Irreecha of October 2016 and all the contributions as well as the editorial were bitter and fuelled by rage, trying to bring to attention how irresponsible the government has been. Instead of protecting citizens, the government deployed the army, including a helicopter that hovered in the sky of Bishoftu to intimidate citizens gathered to celebrate a religious festival, eventuating in either killing them or causing their unforeseen deaths. They all share that it was a traumatic incident that everyone remembers with anger and bitterness.⁴¹

The songs, incidents and media representations discussed in this chapter are illuminating regarding the fact that rituals are not only coopted by powerful political elites and the state for their own political purposes. As ambivalent sites of power relations, rituals do not take a form where “one social group has absolute control over another, but one that simultaneously involves both consent and resistance, misunderstanding and appropriation” (Bell 1997: p. 8). They are not exclusive domains of the powerful. As David Kertzer points out, rituals are also sites where “the oppressed can release pent-up frustrations and hostilities” (1988: p. 131). Drawing on ritual performances in ‘South Asian religions’, Selva J. Raj and Corinne Dempsey highlight that the liminality of rituals creates possibilities of freedom where participants deploy play and humour for subversion and defiance. They continue that the “liminal character of ritual and the freedom inherent in liminality that provide the space and stimulus for creative imagination, empowering ritual performers to engage in what ordinarily might be considered ‘improper behavior.’ Ritual liminality allows participants to step out of the normal order (divine or human) to challenge, defy, invert, or subvert established conventions” (2010: p. 5). As far as political practices are concerned, on the one hand, Irreecha exhibits the splendour of which the Ethiopian state prides itself. On the other hand, beneath the surface of the splendour the state tries to display, one witnesses marginalised voices channeling the politics of dissidence to the extent that they eventually unsettle the ruling party’s arrangement and the nature of Ethiopian politics. Thus, to understand the paradoxes and contradictions of political processes and relations of power in Ethiopia, one could simply look at the Irreecha celebration at Hora Arsadi as a microcosm.

41 Tsedale Lemma. (ed.) (2016). In Memory of the Fallen: Irreecha Massacre. *Addis Standard*, October 2016.

Conclusion: Locating Politics in and of Irreecha

In his successive publications, Michael Neocosmos challenges the notion of politics as a practice reserved for elites, the state and parties with the objective of seizing power. By way of pointing out the need for looking into other actors, objectives and alternative sites for politics, he writes:

There are two points of note here. The first is that a clearly demarcated domain of the political cannot always be assumed to exist, as in the obvious case of ‘traditional society’ in Africa; the second is that the various idioms and discourses deployed by people in affirming their politics, in presenting themselves on the ‘stage of history’, are not always evidently ‘political’, in the sense that they may invoke ‘traditional’, ‘religious’ or other linguistic tropes, which do not count as ‘politics’ for the liberal (or Marxist) episteme (2016: p. 21).

Based on the discussions in the previous chapters, ritual comes to mind as another site where various forms of politics by ordinary citizens are thought, articulated and performed. Rituals amalgamate various political views and practices in one platform which makes them sites of political performances as much as religious ones. According to David Kertzer:

[R]itual is a ubiquitous part of modern political life. Through ritual aspiring political leaders struggle to assert their right to rule, incumbent power holders seek to bolster their authority, revolutionaries try to carve out a new basis of political allegiance. All of these political figures, from leaders of insurrections to champions of the status quo, use rites to create political reality for the people around them. Through participation in the rites, the citizen of the modern state identifies with larger political forces that can only be seen in symbolic form (1988: p. 1).

Rituals are entangled with the socio-political and economic conditions of the universe in which they are performed. Their significance and value stem from such intricate connectivity at which various forms of power relationships are produced, interpreted and contested. Rituals are not separate from the domains of power and politics but rather expose the set of relationships that underlie any structure of power where any change within that structure implicates rituals and vice versa. Since they are practices that reflect existing socio-cultural, economic, political and spiritual relationships within societies,

rituals offer windows through which we access, understand and interpret the manner in which societies make sense of these relationships. Beyond spaces and temporalities of the quotidian, humans create rituals, and the liminality of space and time within them as sites which, according to Victor Turner, are “open to the play of thought, feelings and will; in them are generated new models, often fantastic, some of which may have sufficient power and plausibility to replace eventually the force-backed political and jural models that control the centers of a society’s ongoing life” (Turner 1969: p. vii).

By the same token, the tensions, contradictions and complexities that characterise the post-1991 Ethiopian political landscape are entangled with Irreecha as a ceremony that has high resonance with the political life of the society. My analysis of Irreecha has shown how rituals aid our understanding of the nature of alternative sites for politics, the kind of politics practiced and subjectivities produced. Politics as performed in contexts such as Irreecha get articulated through the relationships of competing histories, socio-political visions and aspirations. The countless political dispositions and processes as produced in Irreecha have implications for the nature of politics, agency and the character of society. This entails looking at the ritual as a dynamic part of antagonisms and contestations by various actors who operate within the ever-changing socio-political power structure. By way of tying up the arguments in the book, I highlight three overlapping points. First is the discussion on locating politics to show in which other domains it plays out; this I do by using the notions of spectacle and battlefield. Second, I discuss the nature of politics and political processes that such alternative domains produce, and third, their implications for processes of subject formation within the interweaving of the state, political actors that contend the state, institutions and the ruled. However, this does not mean that Irreecha is reducible to its functions. Beyond its political significance, in its own right, it is invested with meaning, contested and actively in flux in relation to the changes both internal and external. Thus, while focusing on Irreecha as an alternative site of politics, I stress its complexity and contentiousness.

1 Spectacle and Battleground

Given the experience Ethiopia has had in its recent political history, its population is arguably very vibrant and politically conscious. The 1957 attempted coup against Haile Selassie, the student movement of the 1960s, the 1974 revolution, the 17 years of civil war that culminated in the rise to power of the current regime and socio-political developments that have unfolded since 1991, not to

mention the global political dynamics and shifts, have contributed greatly to the public's heightened political consciousness. The society creates pressure that shapes and complicates the political landscape of the country. Regarding the Oromo, the flourishing of nationalist sentiments and the articulation of political questions by Oromo intellectuals and political parties, organs like the MTA and OLF, have led to a political and cultural "reawakening", to borrow from Mekuria (1996). In the face of such societal vibrancy and active engagement with the existing order, either through conforming or dissenting, the state uses a myriad means at its disposal to delegitimise its opponents, contain dissidence and consolidate its position. As part of this endeavour, the state has penetrated the everyday life of the society and the ubiquity of its presence cuts across ordinary life as much as periodic functions and practices like Irreecha.

In the final analysis, Irreecha is a spectacle coopted by the state. I am using spectacles to describe the cooptation of Irreecha by the state in the way Lisa Wedeen (1999) conceptualises it. According to Wedeen, spectacles are both "systems of signification that publicly represent a regime's understanding of dominance and community and as functional strategies to enforce dominance and construct community. In other words, spectacles are taken simultaneously to represent dominance and to represent as a means of dominating" (1999: p. 13). As a spectacle, it is crucial in at least four interdependent ways to consolidate power. First, it is a mechanism of obtaining the support of the Oromo people by officially endorsing the ritual itself as part of the exercise of ethno-religious rights enshrined in the constitution. The state acts as the body that empowers citizens by granting them the right and entitlement that, as far as the current regime is concerned, they have been denied for centuries. In return, the Oromo grant their support. Thus, it can be argued that it is a site of legitimation, where legitimation means the acceptance of the rulers by the ruled. Second, by appropriating it as a site of self-presentation, the state communicates its ideologies, policies and provisions and at times even campaigns for election. Third, it is a site of production of governable subjects who 'willingly' abide by the rules and participate in its projects. Fourth, it is a way to control and debunk opposition forces that are believed to operate within the context of the celebration. In this way, Irreecha becomes a spectacle to perform domination by way of which subjects are made to self-regulate so as to fit into a technology of governance that resonates to the state's expectations. Irreecha is a site of packaging and delivering state politics to groom governable subjects who unconditionally comply. However, just as rituals are appropriated to reinforce existing power relations, so are they reinvented as sites for combatting the status quo and challenging authorities, which is why at the

same time they are also battlegrounds. As such, Irreecha is knitted with the politics of dissidence.

Here, I borrow battleground from David Guss (2000) to describe two interrelated struggles, one of political dissidence and the other of religious contestations, both of which are up against or produce various forms of subordination and in turn lead to formation of critical political and religious subjectivities. In the first sense, the ritual becomes an ambivalent space because, just as it is a spectacle for the state, it becomes a battleground where the state is confronted, and thus a process of the state's own undoing. As we have seen in the fourth chapter, across the years, Irreecha has become a site of popular struggle that is directed against the regime, which eventually leads to a request for its deposition. As a moment of "ephemeral freedom" (Bakhtin 1984), Irreecha also reduces the state to one of the competitors and objects of ridicule, although this cannot always be maintained given that the state is at the same time an active regulator of the political practice at Irreecha. Notwithstanding the strong state presence, Irreecha is not simply monopolised by the dominant forces as a site where state-composed politics is instilled. Thus, it belongs to neither the state nor the opposition, but remains open to the participating public. It is as much a site of politics as performed from below by subjects that use the most accessible possibilities that allow people to channel their quests, imaginations, criticisms and frustrations in a manner that captures the tension that underlies the intricate relationship between the ruler and the ruled.

It is at this point that the spectacle, at which the state manages to glorify itself, turns to a battlefield. There is a struggle to defy it and exhibit the fragility of the foundation underlying the spectacle. The reinvention of Irreecha as a spectacle by the state runs the risk of assuming that spectators have no political agency and that they accept, mimic and hence reproduce everything being supplied by the state taking the state of affairs for granted. This relationship of the state with the ruled is incognisant of political subjectivities formed to challenge it, conceiving of the ruled as subjects who simply submit to the will of authority. Or even if it recognises the inconsistencies within what is assumed to be a homogenous political entity, these inconsistencies are framed by the state as defiance by just a small fraction of anti-development, anti-peace and stability and anti-democratic forces who attempt to hamper the smooth flow of progress. Then the population is asked to fight them through popular participation on which the state relies to destroy such subversive forces. The miscalculation of the state is that the so-called minority forces are part of the population that is categorised as complacent, and that the alternative political aspirations are held by the same subjects who seem to conform to the state.

Hora Arsadi is a spectacular example of such contradictory exercises of the politics of complacency, which is reflected through acts such as standing ovations for state politicians and dissidence that undermines the framework of politics that the state provides. On the one hand, they clap, and on the other, they sing to criticise the same political rhetoric and practices that they applauded. For example, folksongs are sites and moments of ending the politics of 'as if' and public acts of dissimulation by participants who cunningly move between different sides of politicking. The songs are not only moments of resistance, they are also sites of freedom, of visibilising the subject that has been rendered invisible. But the visibility represents a danger for the regime, because it is regarded as threatening to the structures of domination, and hence the need for quelling and disciplining subjects by all means possible.

Irreecha is therefore as much characterised by state control as it is a site of transgression. Transgressions are not simple acts of subversion with no consequences for the political order. Although those who carry them out might not necessarily set out to change the system the moment they start, they have the capacity to develop into a more serious political struggle that culminates with a change of the political order. Even if they do not necessarily result in change of existing political orders, they are part and parcel of political struggles that constitute the experience of ordinary citizens.¹ The alternative political venue Irreecha offers is one in which political struggle takes shape outside of the parameters assigned to it in terms of where politics can be done, why and by whom. In organising their thoughts and actions, the participants have become part of the making of political history as spearheaded by the people. Irreecha participants have created scripts they use to critique power from their subordinate positions. Instead of the impression that the Oromo are victims of historical and current injustices who need to be rescued and redeemed, they take their fate up as active agents of political actions and struggles. They have inserted themselves into the annals of political discourse and practice as the makers of history, or at least part-and-parcel of a generation whose narratives are not confined to victimhood and passivity. And they have accomplished this by appropriating Irreecha as a battleground.

The second sense in which I use battleground is to refer to Irreecha as a site of the struggle for meaning with particular emphasis on what constitutes religion and whose prerogative it is to define religion. These debates and struggles emerge from internal and external dynamics as well as power relations that inform the shift in meaning-making processes. The construction of what is religious, what is superstitious and from whose perspective, together with

1 For more on transgression, see Wedeen (1999).

its politicisation, have made Irreecha yet another battleground where different ideas are put forward, challenged, subverted and de/legitimised. The focus here is on the interweaving of religious institutions, the state and the educated elites in the making of subordination and the emerging subjectivities from these processes and contestations. What lies behind the collaboration of the above actors in articulating what belongs to the order of things in Irreecha and based on whose perspective? One implication of the contestation of Irreecha in relation to Oromo collectively is that identity is a matter of reinvention among the dynamic political forces in a power-imbued process. Irreecha as an expression of Oromo identity is clearly subject to being negotiated, securitised, militarised, privatised and at the same time commercialised and commodified. In this process, some meanings of Irreecha are made ostentatious while others are entirely erased from the discourse, more particularly in relation to spirit mediums.

The age-old link between the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the Ethiopian polity officially came to an end in 1974. The revolution transformed the political landscape and the place and role of religion was redefined, as the state adopted secularism as a governing principle. However, beyond revising the public role of religion, secularism did not mean the relegation of religion to the private sphere and its removal from political processes in Ethiopia. Religion and the Ethiopian state in the context of the secular principle are summed up by Samuli Schielke's observation of the relationship between the Egyptian state and Islam. Schielke states that:

Secularism does not mean the exclusion of religion from the public, but rather giving religion a specific meaning and functionality. The exact place and weight of religion in the definition of the nation-state are a subject of controversy, but there is a wide consensus that religion definitely has a place in it. The key point here is that religion is conceived of within the frame of the nation-state and that the nation-state is defined, to varying degrees, through its religion(s) (2012: p. 105–6).

Indeed religion is still very influential in the country. If anything, more religious institutions like Islam and other factions of Christianity came to the forefront either as allies or threats to the regime, making the field more complex and contested. This continued in post-1991 Ethiopia, where the state and religion are constitutionally separated with provisions stating that neither can interfere in the affairs of the other.

From the debates on what constitutes Irreecha and its spiritualities, the state and religious institutions like Waqqeffana, Christianity and Islam seem

to agree on the point of what qualifies as a *true* religion and what becomes the anomaly.² As the discussions in chapters one to three demonstrated, order and its maintenance are central to both religion and state; this is where religion and the state intersect and complement one another. Order is largely where “everything is expected to have a purpose, to follow the same principles, to be part of the same system of the nation. Religion must be capable of being made part of this narrative of development” (Schielke 2012: p. 108). In both cases, ordering has a bodily manifestation that imposes restraint on how people should conduct themselves at Hora Arsadi. For the contemporary state, order comes from the place of ‘secular reason and rationality’ inspired by the ideas of ‘modernity and progress’. Order for the religions, as discussed in chapter 3, comes from the place of what a monotheistic religion and its practices should look like in terms of having control of oneself, including bodily movements, how one should embody the space of Irreecha, how and when to do what.

The idea of order serves as a foundation for defining the true religion and excluding those ‘other ones’ which do not fit the narrative of order, rationality, purpose and progress. Order accommodates neither ambivalence nor experiences of subjects whose spirituality is not necessarily rigidified based on some orthodox narrative of norms. Because ambivalence is regarded as a space of disorder and spontaneity, it makes order unstable, subverts it and disrupts its flow and predictability. Everything else out of that defined order is incomprehensible and hence should be disposed of.³ A textbook example is mediumship and those who find it meaningful. Mediumship is anything but orderly; if anything, it is something that disrupts order. People’s ecstatic and emotive experiences with the divine are not ‘intelligible’ so they are not religious enough to be accommodated, less so in public gatherings like Irreecha since they are disruptive to a smooth flow. Any claims to constitutional provisions on freedom to exercise religious rights both as individual and collective are stifled because, in the eyes of the dominant groups, mediumship does not qualify as religion and so the claims to rights are rendered inadmissible. The narrative of anomaly then becomes the foundation on which their exclusion is

2 Talal Asad (1993; 2003) has it that to impose religion as a transhistorical and universal concept is a work of power as much as the idea of what constitutes a true religion. His critique of the imposition of the category of religion makes a lot of sense in the Ethiopian context, and how hegemonic groups including the state and the discourses they propagate matter in defining certain practices as religion others as superstition.

3 Bakhtin (1984) extensively discusses ambivalence and how it is regarded as a threat to order in the time of enlightenment, partly because of its unpredictability as a result of which it does not sit well with the notions of order.

justified, their subordination is produced, and out of which their subjectivities are formed. The most compelling part of this is that the whole debate on what qualifies as a true religion is a highly gendered process. The marginalisation of women is tied to this debate. This in turn is linked to the homogenising assertions of nationalist projects that have a problematic and skewed view of gender relations, conveniently relegating women to a ceremonial assemblage. Even when the masculinist notion that is nationalism makes the effort to pay attention to women as ~~historical~~ subjects, it does so through discourses that articulate women's subjectivity from the place of care, domesticity and motherhood. Nonetheless, ethnographic accounts and histories show that even in what seems to be a marginalising space in the way it represents women, women's subjectivities are inscribed through their acts and decisions that we witness in the space they carve under the sacred tree, both on the day of celebration and on ordinary days of ritual performances. Hence, the two overlapping groups; women and mediums penetrate into the normative structure and system that constantly seeks to exclude them and in their very presence, they already always upset what is normal.

2 Locating Politics

One of the problems with the approach that treats politics as a focus on material interests is that it regards other aspects like the symbolic display of power as secondary or less important to our understanding of political processes. And while it is paramount to our understanding of the way political power operates, this approach also limits the possibilities of studying how politics is practiced by ordinary people, as embodied in ritual performances like Irreecha. As it privileges a statist approach to politics, it does not create room for politics as an exercise by subjects for whom political struggle is not necessarily separated from other forms of struggle in various facets of life. In as far as owning their own politics and re/inscribing their subjectivities in history goes, Irreecha offers the space for popular struggle that is not necessarily tied to claims of state power. Thus, Irreecha can be presented as a critique of state-centric power-oriented conventional politics that does not account for popular agency and subjectivity. Over the years, participants at the ritual have affirmed their dignity by visibly challenging the structure that humiliated them; they have ensured that they are makers and agents of history. Even when they were subjected to violence, the violence was articulated as martyrdom or sacrifice that opened possibilities for change and empowerment for further struggle rather than humiliation and giving up.

In this sense, politics at Irreecha is a reflection of the nature of the post-1991 Ethiopian state, which has made ethnicity the main organiser of the political community. TPLF, later on EPRDF, flourished in a context where popular resistance against most post-colonial authoritarian African states was widespread and well-supported. These struggles centred on the category of ethnic or religious identity and the right to self-determination as potential sites of emancipation. Driven by the same logic of identity for emancipation, Ethiopia's current ruling party toppled the military regime after 17 years of civil war (1974–1991). Unlike the previous rulers who strove to negate differences and build a homogenous nation, EPRDF's emancipatory politics was founded on embracing ethno-religious differences as fundamental to its logic and pillars for survival.⁴ This made ethnic federalism an experimental framework, drawing on ethnicity as a unit for political action. Ethnic federalism found its way as one of the most radical experiments to attend to such identity based grievances in the country, and to tackle the problem identity created by being a source of privilege for some and marginalisation for others. Ethnic identity became political identity through practices of interpellations and subject formation. As a result, such location-specific and politicised categories of ethnic identity are manufactured, managed and controlled by the state. In the political processes that unfolded in Ethiopia in the last decades, ethnic and religious categories have become prominent as sites of both imagining emancipation as well as organising grievances and inspirations for struggle. This is precisely what informs popular political thinking and struggles in current Ethiopia, since the scene is set by the state within the framework of ethnic federalism, which regulates all social, economic, cultural and political formations in the country. The struggle is shaped by the ambition to achieve freedom for a particular group through seizing the state that produces the logic actively excluding alternative political subjectivities that might not align themselves with the state's logic.

The same provision for which the state celebrates itself as an emancipator and provider of freedom and rights becomes a basis to exclude, and those who are excluded play the same card to explain their exclusion and demand inclusion within the parameters set by the state that institutionalised the categories of identity. For the political elites it has been a struggle for the right to be included in the existing structure, not necessarily to alter it in a manner

4 In this sense, there seems to be a correlation between indirect rule of the colonial era and ethnic federalism, if we go by Mahmood Mamdani's (2012) assertion that both focus on difference and on how it operates to categorise the masses. EPRDF's logic, for instance, is built on its unwavering devotion to the cause of identity revival of the once neglected or marginalised, as much as its politics thrives on starker boundaries within what it calls nations and nationalities.

that could bring a holistic change which could accord societies what they are demanding. This is, in a way, appropriating 'identity politics' to look up to the state to solve a problem that it had a big part in creating and reproducing. In this sense, the experience with the promotion of Irreecha as an icon of national identity reflects one of the major pitfalls of identity politics and its place in popular political struggle. By actively referring to what is regarded as historical injustice that denied the Oromo the right to celebrate their identity, other political struggles are silenced or rendered irrelevant. Such an emphasis on restoration and open celebration of collective identity reduces all complex historical and structural questions the people raise to their ethnic belonging and whether or not they are included within the state's political order. The emphasis on the discourse and practice of promoting Irreecha in connection with Oromo identity is trapped by the state's own constructed identitarian impulse. Also, presenting ethnic identity as the only comprehensive organising facade for social movements conceals internal differentiations that are based on gender, class, educational background, age, profession and locality (urban/rural) to mention just few. For example, what is appealing to urban dwelling technocrat might not be so for peasants who come from rural parts of Ethiopia as both do not necessarily have the same sets of priorities to begin with. Moreover, what goes on in the political process of the Oromo nation is not certainly peculiar to them but part and parcel of a historical struggle by various nations to assert a dignity that has been denied for years. It is also linked with regional and global historical and political processes which interweave to shape the local politics. Thus, if we can go past ethnicity as a state produced category and consider it as an outcome of historical and social processes, then there might be a way out to imagining larger visions beyond, but without abandoning, ethnic identities. As Mamdani (1996; 2018) suggests, to imagine a larger and more universal visions of emancipation might be possible from ones historic and geographic location. Alliance building based on shared visions and interests across differences can be achieved without repudiating particularities and specificities of a group. Indeed, this presupposes acknowledging identities and differences as historically shifting mobilisational tools rather than permanent givens that are not open to negotiations and contestations.

Finally, my focus on Irreecha to interrogate politics and political processes is a modest attempt to reflect on the general developments the country has been undergoing over the last few decades. As such, the book does not cover all scholarship on Ethiopian politics, nor does it claim to exhaust scholarship on Oromo political struggle. It is rather a glimpse that tries to provoke further studies and investigations which take experiences and lived realities of ordinary members of the society more seriously.

Glossary of Amharic and Oromiffa Words

Amharic Words (Also Written in the Geez Script)

Akerari (አክራሪ)	fanatical
Ameleko (አምልኮ)	an act of worship
Ashānda (አሸንዳ)	annual festival celebrated in August in Amhara and Tigray regions
Araqé (አረቄ)	home-made hard liquor
Awāleia (አዎልያ)	name of a spirit
Balä (ባለ)	owner
Bäad (በአድ)	alien/not belonging
Ch'at (ጫት)	<i>Catha edulis</i> , a leaf chewed as a stimulant
Därg (ደርግ)	literally 'committee' but mainly used to describe the regime (1974–91)
Ihadig (ኢሃዲግ)	EPRDF/the current ruling party
Ethiopiawinet (ኢትዮጵያዊነት)	Ethiopian-ness
Faras (ፈረስ)	horse
Fat'no dārash (ፈጥኖ ደራሽ)	a squad assigned to act swiftly when needed
Fiché Chämbälala (ፍቺ ጨምበላላ)	New Year of the Sidama People of Ethiopia
Hadra mäsaḅ (ሃድራ መሳብ)	Singing to invoke spirits
Kärama (ክራማ)	Name of spirit
Lej (ለጅ)	Title for royal families
Mäseqal (መስቀል)	cross
Mäskäräm (መስከረም)	September
Megeb läsera (ምግብ ለስራ)	work for food
P'énté (ዲንጤ)	evangelical/P'éntécostal Christian
Qäsis (ቀሲስ)	Priest
Tabot (ታቦት)	copy of the arc of covenant
T'äla (ጠላ)	locally prepared beverage
T'eq'emet (ጥቅምት)	October
Wäyané (ወያኔ)	rebel
Weq'abi (ወታቢ)	a kind of spirit
Yäkatit (የካቲት)	February
Zar (ዛር)	a kind of spirit

Oromiffa Words

Aba	owner, father
Aba Gada	head of the Gada institution
Aba Malka	father/overseer of the sacred lake/river
Attete	ritual of fertility performed by women
Ayyana	guardian/benevolent spirit of Waaqa
Conni	Oromo traditional cloth
Delega	trance state
Dhalcha	grey
Dhibayu	libation
Dhichasa	singing and dancing together
Dire	open field
Faji	emblem/symbol/flag
Ferso	a home-prepared beverage
Galma	temple
Gada	Oromo traditional institution of administration
Hora	lake
Irreecha	Thanksgiving rituals
Irrefachu	the action of performing Irreecha
Jila	pilgrimage
Kusa/Fole	child of previous Aba Gada
Malka	lake/river
Malka saquu	opening the lake with prayer and rituals
Mana	house
Mecca	Oromo sub-group
Muda	anointment
Oda	sacred tree
Qallu	male spirit medium
Qalliti	female spirit medium
Qeerro	tiger
Qubbee	Oromiffa alphabets
Sida	sacred stone
Siqqe	sacred stick women carry
Saquu	a ritual of opening the Melka
Tulema	Oromo sub-group
Tullu	hilltop
Ufa	sacred object
Waaqa	Sky God
Waqqeffana	worshipping/following Waaqa
Waqqeffata	worshipper/follower of Waaqa

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